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The Fianx had abducted
Earth's womankind. A
few escaped—to become
beautiful, trampling,
man-stealing monsters

The INCUBI of PARALLEL X

A Novel of Interlocking Worlds
by TED STURGEON

VENGEANCE ON MARS! by D. D. LEVINS





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PLANET STORIES



VOL. 5, NO. 2

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER, 1951

► *Novel of Interlocking Space*

THE INCUBI OF PARALLEL X Theodore Sturgeon 4

Gone were Earth's womankind. The Ffanx-blasted planet had been wrung of the young, the beautiful. Only Garth, son of Gesell the Great, knew the gateway to the prison-world—a world of 70-foot, man-stealing Giantesses.

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A man without a planet, this 1,000,000-year-old Daryesh. Once Lord of a Thousand Suns, now condemned to rove the spaceways in alien form, searching for love, for life, for the great lost Vwyrdia.

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Eden could not have been half so good as this green jungle planet. Yet every Eden has its secret Serpent . . .

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T. T. SCOTT, *President*

MALCOLM REISS, *General Manager*

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THE VIZIGRAPH

We wish to announce that our friend Jerome Bixby has moved into lush fields so we have arranged for PLANET to be edited by a robot. It was with some trepidation that the management took this step but finally it was decided that this would be a most interesting experiment all around. Think of the advantages! Someone on the job every moment. No coffee drinking at ten. No manuscripts late to the printer unless Mister R blows a fuse. A tremendous idea! We were lucky that they had a robot for sale in one of these neighboring Army Surplus stores where they sell everything.

So for an experimental period at least PLANET will be under the steel-jointed wing of Mr. R. Project Robot P. S. 1 we call him.

Mr. R's first job will be to pick the pic winners, July issue. Take over Mr. R!

... zump ... zump ... zump ... best fellow letter (x) Chad Okver, (2) Ed Cox (3) Dick Ryan.

You all likee Mister Robot, please—heh, heh, heh ...

BRADBURY NEEDS GROWING

55 Taylor Ave.
East Keansburg, N. J.

Dear Ed,

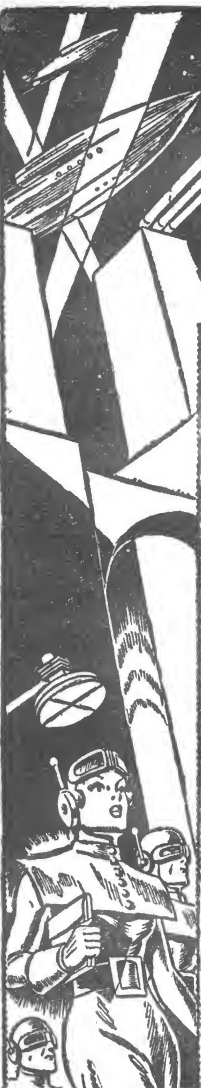
In your May issue William F. Nolan takes a few pot-shots at Ray Bradbury's critics. As one of those whose criticism of Bradbury has appeared in print may I be permitted to answer him?

To begin with I also have no patience with those who criticize Bradbury's science or lack of it. No one has visited any of the planets, no one can say with any exactitude what they are like, so we are all free to imagine what we please concerning them. It wouldn't make Bradbury's stories any better or worse if their locale were any other planet besides Mars. This type of criticism is mere shadow-boxing.

I concede further that Bradbury is a conscientious craftsman. He has a skill with words that any other writer might well envy. He can use them to evoke the exact mood he wants in his readers. But I repeat—technical skill is not enough. Surely there is no one left who believes in art for art's sake! The artist creates because he has something to say, but if what he says is bad, all the skill in the world does not make it good art. In my opinion what Bradbury says over and over in all his stories is bad.

I think I make a valid criticism of Bradbury's obsession with death. Certainly, as William Nolan says, we are born, we live, we eat, we sleep and die, but birth is the capital that begins the sentence and death is the period that ends it. It is morbid to concentrate on death to the exclusion of all the nuances of living. The death-motif that is in everything Bradbury writes, no matter what the title, is a symbol of his belief in the basic rottenness of mankind.

It is curious how the same fans who deplore the crude racist



prejudices of a Sigler accept those same prejudices carried to their logical conclusion. There is no real difference between the belief that all, or most, of one particular nationality, or religion, or race is inherently venal and the belief that all, or most, of mankind is.

The greatest fallacy of all time is the supposed changelessness of human nature. Human nature constantly has been, is being, and will be changed time after time. Science-fiction writers, especially one with the technique of Bradbury, need to grow with the times and with their readers. William Nolan may revere Bradbury, but there are others who expect better from him.

Yours truly,

MARY WALLACE CORBY

BEST SHORT-SHORT IN THE MAG

N. 5028 Walnut
Spokane 12, Wash.

Dear Mud Turtle:

While my empire falls to pieces around my reverberating ears, I find time to aspire from my waning military duties as Field Marshal of the Austrashian Empire Field Forces, to type. Type what, I don't know. I am going to give an account of the long seige of my fortress, which is fast drawing to a close.

As I sit here in the "last ditch defense" of my once mighty military empire, in the massive steel reinforced concrete and stone building that is my headquarters, I hear the terrible screams of my last troopers. The faithful that chose to die with their commander instead of deserting and dying one by one on the fiery, waterless desert to the east of here, or the Garth Swamps to the north and south. There is no retreat.

One of the cornices containing a battery of rocket tubes and a dozen tubemen is hit and falls many rods into the rocky valley below.

My last five staff officers are flinging important papers into the blazing incinerator in the center of the floor. Six troopers, my best, are rigging hasty fortifications in my huge office. Small, powerful rocket tubes point their ugly muzzles down the stone steps leading to the courtyard, the only entrance to this place.

I hear the enemy charging up the steps, now. The roaring, hissing, terrible rockets are not making an impression.

The troopers suddenly stand erect, clawing at their throats. They fall to the platinum flagstones, faces grey, gasping and writhing in their death throes. They grab their guts and retch. There are no visible signs of bodily injury. Could it be my best troops have gone off their rockers?

No. The staff officers throw in the last shred of document and seize the hot tube grips. They loose perhaps one or two salvos of rockets, then fall over weapons, vomiting.

What manner of war is this? Not a sound of battle, except the few rocket emplacements still intact. The enemy has no apparent explosives, yet in five days, my invincible armies of twelve millions of men have been slaughtered.

I drop my heavy black gaberdine uniform coat, weighty with brass braid (we got so poor

buying platinum flagstones we could only afford brass braid . . .) and medals. I flex my arms and my gray silk shirt splits down the back. Tight shirt.

I seize the single remaining rocket tube and aim it as best I can at the leader of the screaming rabble charging up the steps.

But a horrible thing meets my pulsating, bloodshot eyeballs. I scream, fall back, and as I lay there, kicking my legs and cutting loose with the death rattle, I am happy.

The identity of Phil Harris' THING is no longer a mystery. Nossir. It is no longer a secret! I know the answer! I KNOW. IT IS NO DUM-DE-DUM!

IT IS—PLANET STORIES!!!!

No wonder the guy couldn't get rid of it. No wonder the broken down panhandle said nix when it was offered to him. Is any wonder the guy couldn't get in the house—that his wife kicked him out? No.

In time I feel a cool liquid bathing my fevered forehead. I open my eyes. There it is. It. The copy of P.S. is bending over me with its cover mercifully folded so I can't see it. It knows I would die of shock if directly exposed to it.

It is offering itself to me. I take it, hesitantly. I ask it why it ruined my empire and smashed my dreams of conquest.

It says there is a letter of mine inside it. I say it is full of tripe the Mag blushes and opens to page 99. It says I made Bicksbees' blue pencil ache, and therefore I forfeit my rights as Galactic Empire Chief. I agree. Why, anybody that would harm a molecule on that little blue warclub deserves the Alky treatment in the Snake House.

I put a sheet of lead ten feet thick between IT and myself and bid it to let me see the cover. It does.

I feel the harmful radiations shake my body even through the thick lead sheeting . . . What a cover! Yeah, it's an Anderson atrocity. They put Jap and Nazi committers of atrocities in prison. Why not Anderson. His tortures have even a greater magnitude.

Those facial expressions. Facial? The guy looks like somebody has him on the rack, burning certain tender parts of the body with cigar butts. The guy with the broad in hi. arms, that is! Of course.

The fellow down on the bottom of the page . . . The all blue guy. Yeah. He looks like an editor, don't he. Yeah. That's what P.S. does to its editors in a number of years, take heed.

That dame. What a frame! Whay oh whay can't I go rocketing around with a babe like that for a collar! It can't feel any worse than a back pack parachute—the rocket, I mean. Of course. The rocket assembly. Of course.

What! Sacrilege! Anderson is losing his ag-gies! No swords with nicked edges lousing up the cover. Swords not even a ro-magnon man would be seen with. Cro magnard, that is!

Who . . . writes those blubs for the stories? They're lousy. So lousy they're good. Just like a bulldog. So ugly . . .

Comes voting time. I can take it. With head held high, I remember all my old infantry drill. I do perfect facings up to the post. I smoke my last cigaret right down to the last quarter inch and light another on it. I wave the subaltern

(Continued on page 102)



THE INCUBI of PARALLEL X

by THEODORE STURGEON

Gone were Earth's womankind. The Ffanx-blasted planet had been wrung of the young and beautiful. Only Garth, son of Gesell the Great, knew the guarded Gateway to the prison-world—a world of berserk, 70-foot Giantesses.

IT'S SMALLER, Garth thought as he lay on his belly on top of the hill and looked down, through carefully parted branches, at Gesell Hall. The Hall had towered over him when he was a child,

last year, last week, last night, in his dreams. And now, at the moment he had schooled himself for, waited for since the day his world had ended, he could feel no thrill, no triumph—only it's smaller.



The great building, with its rambling wings, its twisted, broken power receptor antennae, its yellow weed-grown courts, lay as if in the hollow of some mighty neck, with a cliff and a mountain shoulder shrugging it into its crowded, cluttered, sheltered state.

I should have known, he thought. I was only a kid when I left—when the Ffanx—

He lost himself in the restimulated dream, the clear mental picture of his toy spaceship, hovering in midair on a pillar of koolflame fire, and his child's dream of other worlds, and then the shrill thunder of jets—real jets, Ffanx jets—which had brought an end to his dream and his childhood and his world.

Garth Gesell slipped a long-fingered hand under his abdomen and hauled out a knobby root which rowelled him. *It was there, he thought, right there by the main building. The Ffanx came, and I ran around to the front and through the double doors, and right in to Dad and Mooley. And the roof came down, and Mooley the cat, ran through fire and was naked and agonized, and then there was Dad's head with a splinter through the bridge of his nose and the end of it in a ruined eye, talking to me . . . talking out of a mountain of rubble, out of torture, out of gentleness and greatness, asking me to save a race and a world and a system . . .*

Well, he was back. Not back home, for this was enemy territory now. All the backslid, savage world was enemy territory for anyone who ventured out of his settlement, and Garth's adopted village was many a long day's march behind him. Behind him, too, were years of growth and training and of living with the nagging, driving force of his childhood promise to his father: I shall open the Gateway.

"I shall open the Gateway." He said it aloud, intensely, in a deep re-dedication to his father's wish. And then he threw himself violently to one side.

His watchful subconscious, his trained hearing, were a shade too slow to avoid the blow completely. The short, stubby spear whacked him painfully between the shoulder-blades instead of burying itself in his back. He rolled back over it, snatching it up as he rolled, and bounced to his feet in

a single fluid motion, striking upward with the spear. He got a quick impression of a tall, wide, golden figure which, without moving its feet, bent gracefully aside to avoid the spear's hungry point. Then there was a sharp blow on Garth's wrist and the spear went flying end over end into the undergrowth.

GARTH STOOD, shaken and helpless, grasping his wrist, and looked up into the easy smile of the stranger.

"Move fast, don't you?" said the man. He had a broad, clean-cut face and the rasping, rapid speech of a Northerner. He stood with his thick legs apart, the knees slightly flexed. Garth had the impression that from that stance the man could move instantly in any direction, including straight up. "But not fast enough for Bronze," the man added.

Garth understood the name and the reason for it—the golden skin and yellow hair, the rivet-studded belt and boots were obviously a personal trade-mark. In his hand Bronze held a polished throwing-stick, the source of the stubby, bullet-like spear. He slowly whacked the end of it into a wide, horny palm as he studied Garth. "What are you after?"

Garth thumbed over his shoulder at the crumbling building down in the green hollow. "What do you call that place?"

"Gesell."

"I am Gesell too."

Bronze's face turned into a mask. He stepped past Garth, dropping his throwing-stick into the quiver of spears which hung behind his right shoulder. He stooped and picked up Garth's weapon and handed it back to him.

Garth carefully avoided saying "Thanks."

"I heard you say you'd open the Gateway."

Garth nodded.

Bronze said, "Could I help you?" and in that moment Garth knew he'd won. He suppressed a smile. "I don't need help," he said.

"You might," said Bronze.

Garth shrugged as if he didn't care. In reality, he cared a great deal. He had known for a long time that he'd have to recruit some help, and he liked the looks of

those big shoulders, and of the obvious skill that had gone into the man's trappings and weapons. "What's it to you if I open the Gateway?"

Bronze licked his lips. Then, with no attempt to conceal his motives, he said, "There's women in there. Thousands of 'em. The best, the smartest on this world or off it." He paused. "I come here all the time. I sit up here and look down at the Hall and try to figure a way in." He spread his big hands. "If you were trying to stop me from getting to those women, I wanted to kill you. If you can help me get to them, I'm on your side. All the way. See?"

"Fair enough," said Garth, and let the grin come through this time. "Not enough women around here for you?"

"Not enough women in the whole damn world. Seven in Prellton—that's my village—and a hundred men. Over the hill there, in Haddon Town, there's twice as many women and three times as many men."

"So you want the Gateway open so you can cut lose with the whole lot of 'em?" Me?" cried Bronze. "No, man, I just want one. Just one woman, all for me."

"I see you're a reasonable man," said Garth smiling. "You can go with me."

Bronze looked as if Garth had given him a kingdom, and a pair of wings to boot. "I heard of you Gessells."

"You heard of my father," said Garth.

"They still tell stories about him."

If there has to be a shrine, there's bound to be a legend, thought Garth. "Why didn't you try breaking into the Hall?"

"Some tried, one time or another," said Bronze. He cast a quick, fearful glance down into the hollow. "They're all dead."

"That's what I heard." Garth studied Bronze thoughtfully. "Ever see it happen?"

"Once." Bronze swung his spear quiver off his shoulder and squatted on the bank, running the spears nervously through his thick fingers as he spoke, testing their points, their grooved hafts. "I was to watch, me and Rob O'Bennet and his fighting-boys. Flan of Haddon's Town and his men got the main assault because they have

the larger settlement. We were to storm down and back them once they'd breached the Hall." He paused and wet his lips. His amber eyes were haunted. "Two Guardians the Hall had, then as now—two only, just two against the two hundred of us. Flan's boys raised a yell you could hear over the mountain, and charged. Not a sign of life from the Hall until they were half across the court there—" he pointed —"and then the Guardians stepped out, one from the north corner, one from the south, by the little door. There was a blast of green fire the like of which words won't handle." Bronze covered his eyes as he spoke. "I saw it stretch between the two Guardians for a half second, and then I was dazzle-blinded."

"When I could see again my brave boys were gone, leaving me writhing my burned eyes into the grass here. And down there in the court lay Flan and thirty-eight of his boys, smoking and black."

HE PAUSED while the terrifying picture died behind his eyes. "Afterward," he said, "a party of us went over to Haddon's Town to see if so many dead hadn't left a widow for us, but they had the place well stockaded."

Garth made no comment. "Tell me what you know of the Guardians."

"I'll tell you little enough," said Bronze. "But if I said what I'd heard I'd be talking a month or more. All you ever see of them is that pointed cowl and the long habit that goes to the ground. Some say they're men and women—or were. Some say they're monsters from the other side of the Gateway."

"We'll soon see," said Garth.

"You're a Gesell," said Bronze, his voice hoarse with suppressed excitement. "You can just walk in like a guest"

"I can not," said Garth shortly. "I hate to disappoint you, Bronze, but a lot of water has gone over the dam since the Ffanx conquered us. My father built the Gateway twenty years ago, thinking that it would guard those women for the month or so it took to smash the Ffanx. They killed my father and closed the Gateway. And by then the world was a ruin, with the women gone and the men fighting

over the handful who were left, and the secret of the Gateway locked up in the brain of an eight-year-old child. And now the Hall is a shrine, and the guards are Guardians, science is magic and each part of the world fights every other part."

"What are you saying? You can't just walk in, and you a Gesell?"

"Everything's changed," said Garth patiently. "I've listened to every traveler's tale, read every record—there are damned few enough—and it all comes to the one stupidity: I am the only man alive who can open the Gateway, and those dedicated fools down there will kill me on sight if I go near it."

"How do I know you're a Gesell?" said Bronze, in re-awakened suspicion.

"You don't," said Garth. Without looking up or turning, he made one sudden, brief movement. The tube seemed to leap from his right holster into his hand. "Look, Bronze."

Bronze's face went stony. "What is it?" "What is that thing?"

Garth pressed the stud on the side of the tube. A beam of white light leaped from the tube to bathe Bronze's terrified face. The big man cried out, and then sat frozen, eyes shut in terror. Garth turned it off and dropped it back into the holster. "My name is Gesell," he said conversationally, "but I don't give a hub-forted damn if you believe it or not."

"What was it? What did it do? That light, that white light—"

"Just light," said Garth, and laughed. He slapped the big man on his meaty shoulder. "Stop your chattering."

"You shouldn't 'a done that," said Bronze hoarsely. "You didn't have to scare me like that, Gesell. I said I'd help. I wasn't backing out. I believe you."

"Good. Now shut up and let me figure this out."

THEY STOOD at the crest of a wooded slope that fell away almost vertically to the clearing below. The Hall stood in the center of the clearing, and beyond it was another rise—the mountain shoulder itself, not quite as high as the elevation on which they hid. The weed-grown court offered no shelter except a couple of giant

trees, one of which towered over the central building. One thick branch held a mighty, protective arm over the low roof. Garth stared at it and at the opposite slope.

"Bronze!"

Bronze was by him, almost crowding him in his eagerness to serve. "What, Gesell?"

"Just how good are you with that womera of yours?"

"Good enough, Gesell. I once killed a deer at ninety yards."

"How many?"

"Seventy," said Bronze, finding himself fixed by Garth's deep eyes. He gulped and grinned.

"It's damn near a hundred and fifty over to the top of the bluff—see it there, the sheer rock straight over the Hall?"

"Uh-huh. I could peg a spear over there. Wouldn't hit too hard, though."

"Could you put it exactly there?"

Confidently Bronze made a ring of his thumb and forefinger. "I could put it through that."

"Show me."

Bronze selected a spear and fitted the butt of it to the cup-shaped hook in the end of his throwing stick. He tested the ground under his feet, glanced overhead to check for overhanging brush, and moved a little to the left. For a moment he stood poised, fixing the opposite cliff with a hypnotic eye. Then he moved. His arm was a blur, and the stick itself was invisible. It all but crackled as it cleft the air.

For a brief moment Garth lost sight of the spear altogether. Then his quick eye caught its flicker just before it stopped, deep-buried in a tree-trunk at the lip of the rock cliff. He held his breath, and in a second or so he heard, through the warm afternoon air, the soft, solid *thunk* of its impact.

Incredible! He thought. He said, boredly, "Not too bad. I'd hate to depend on that thing if there was any wind, though."

Garth threw off his belt. He stood up in a single garment, a skin-tight shorts-and-tunic combination of midnight blue, with a narrow white stripe all the way around under his armpits and another just below his waistline. Raising his arms, he

felt along this line and drew out a small ring, which he slid along the stripe. It was, judging by the wide eyes and slack mouth, Bronze's first view of a slide fastener.

Garth repeated the movement with a second ring on the lower stripe, and drew off the center portion of his tunic over his head—a single, resilient tube of soft, thin fabric. He ran its edge through his fingers, stopped, and carefully picked out a thread, which he worked free. Ignoring the astounded Bronze, he began to unravel the material.

"What you doing?"

Garth said, "Make yourself useful. I want you to sweep the ground clean—really clean—some place where it's solid. I want an area six by six feet without so much as a straw on it, with clear air above it. Get to it."

Willing and mystified, Bronze did as he was told. By the time Garth had thirty feet of thread cleared, the area was ready and Bronze, panting, was back at Garth's side. Garth took pity on him—he was obviously about to burst with curiosity. He held up the thread. "Break off a piece for me, Bronze boy."

Bronze took the end of the thread, wrapped it around his fists, and—"Wait!" laughed Garth.

He picked up two heavy pieces of tree-branch, unwound the thread from the big unresisting fists, and took a couple of turns of the thread around each piece of wood, leaving about six inches of thread between them. "Now try it," he said. "Grip the wood, not the thread."

Puzzled, Bronze grasped the two pieces of wood and pulled. The thread went taut with a musical twang which rose in pitch as Bronze pulled. A look of utter amazement crossed his broad face. He relaxed, turned the two pieces of wood so that he wound up more thread and had only two inches between them. He set his back against a tree, knotted his jaw, and, with his great hands close to his chest, began to pull. His triceps swelled until the stretched skin shone. His body moved visibly away from the tree that he leaned against as his scapular muscles bunched and crawled.

There was a muffled crackling from his shoulders, and Garth stepped forward in alarm. Then one of the pieces of wood gave. The thread sliced through it like a scythe through a stand of wheat, and Bronze stood gasping, staring foolishly at the cleancut stub of branch in his hand. The thread fell away, unstretched, unbroken.

"I gave you the wood," Garth grinned, "because it would've sliced through your paws."

"What Ffaux stuff is that?" gasped Bronze.

"That isn't Ffaux stuff; it's strictly human. molecularly condensed fibre spun under massive ion bombardment, if that makes any never mind to you. It has linear cohesion in the order of six tons test and eight and a half tons breaking strain. And it has no rotary cohesion at all."

"Yeah," said Bronze, "but what is it?"

"It's what you're going to tie to a spear and fire over the gulch for me. Now let's get busy and flake it out here. There's four hundred yards of it in this shirt. Half that should be enough. We'll give it a little more."

FOR TWO HOURS, as the afternoon shadows grew long, they worked, laying the thread meticulously in a series of small coils. Each turn of each coil lay flat and obedient. Slowly the coils began to carpet the cleared area. They talked little, except toward the end of the laborious job. Finally—"That should do it," Garth said.

Bronze straightened up and punched himself in his aching kidneys. "I'm hungry."

"Feed us," said Garth.

Bronze took up his quiver and throwing-stick without a word, and glided away through the underbrush. Within a quarter of an hour he was back, carrying two large rabbits. One had a ragged hole through the head just behind the eyes, and the other was still impaled through the ribcage and heart by one of the stubby spears. Bronze squatted down, pulled out a worn knife, and with the swift casualness of long practice, gutted and skinned one of the animals and handed the warm and dripping quarters to Garth.

"Now listen to me," Garth said with his

mouth full. "I don't know for sure who those Guardians are. But this I do know for sure—that green fire you saw doesn't come from them. It comes from under the ground—an energy field activated by something they carry under those long robes . . . Why do I bother to explain anything to you?"

"I'm listening," grunted Bronze, spitting out a piece of gristle.

"All right. Now get this, it takes two Guardians, both on the line of those underground cables, to set off that fire. But *it takes two of them to do it*. Do you understand? If I can get one of them out of the way, you can jump the other one without any danger."

"Uh?" Bronze wiped rabbit blood off his chin.

"Are you following this? I'm going to leave you in a minute, and I want to know I can depend on you. Are you going to take my word for it—that you can tackle a Guardian without danger of getting burned?"

Bronze looked at him. "You said I could, didn't you?" he asked simply.

Garth let the grin come through again. "I think we're going to make it, Bronze boy," he said. "Now here's the plan."

THE NIGHT was cool and still, but Garth, naked except for his belt, his boots, and the briefest of shorts—which were all that was left of his tunic—was warm and slick with sweat as he completed the long, silent climb to the top of the bluff. He filled and emptied his lungs in deep, open-throated gasps as he felt his way along the lip of the sheer rock wall of the cliff. He found the bald spot and the tree into which Bronze had sunk his test spear that afternoon.

He stepped behind the tree in which Bronze's spear still stuck, and, reaching around it with his flashlight in his hand, sent a quick, white beam up the trunk.

Then he waited.

There was a crescent moon in the sky, a chunky moon that urgently wanted to be gibbous. Somewhere a katydid cried for the grease like the proverbial squeaky wheel, and a tree-toad plucked away at its piano-wire heartstrings. Over the brink

was blackness—eighty feet or better, straight down—and then, away from the cliff's shadow, a hundred yards from the base of the bluff, stood the arched shadow of the great tree with its limb stretched out over the main building like a giant frozen in a gesture of benison.

Where was Bronze? The opposite hill was a featureless mass of shadow and shifting moonlight. Was he there, sighting carefully on the place where he had seen Garth's gleam of light? Or was he gone, freed from the spell of wonderment and awe that Garth had put on him, strolling back toward his village to spend tonight and the rest of his muscle-bound life with idle speculation about the time he almost helped to open the Gateway?

The katydid and the treefrog suddenly were more than Garth could bear. With a snort of impatience he stepped from behind the tree. Immediately there was a whining whisper that crescendoed closer—air fanned his nose and eyes, and something slammed into the tree trunk. He went to his knees, staring up into blackness and then, in spite of himself, laughed. "I hope I've used up all my dumbness for tonight," he thought ruefully. He had known the impossibility of Bronze's hitting the tree again, especially in the dark—and had almost stepped out of the shelter of the tree-trunk in time to catch the spear with his silly head.

The spear hadn't stuck in the tree, for he had cautioned Bronze to bury the point in a piece of heartwood; he'd never have been able to pull it out of the tree, and, to do what he had to do, the thread-end must be free.

He fumbled about for the spear and found it. From his belt-pouch he drew a pair of molded gloves, thin, light, impenetrable, made of the same condensed matter as his tunic. Slipping them on, he picked up the spear and purely by touch found the thread. He brought it in hand over hand, yards of it, until suddenly it jerked sharply, twice, in his grip. He grinned. That was Bronze's "Good luck!"

Taking a bight of the thread, he walked once around the tree, thrust the loop of the bight under the main part where it would be pinched between that part and the

tree-trunk. A slight tug on the free end would cast the line adrift.

He took a deep breath and walked to the cliff-edge. Everything depended on his estimates of the distances involved.

This is it, he thought. Carefully he took the thread at the point his measurements had brought him to, and tied it to the back of his belt. He knelt and swept a space on the ground, and carefully recoiled the line so it would flake away freely. Then he went to the edge of the cliff, reached up over his head, and got his gloved hands on the anchored part of the line, where it passed tautly from tree to tree across the hollow. He watched then, and tried not to think.

The buildings were dark, except for a dim orange light in the main Hall. He could see a flickering, an occasional movement as if restless figures inside passed and re-passed the light.

What the hell was Bronze doing over there? Had he forgotten what he was supposed to do next? The big, stupid, slow . . .

From the other side of the canyon came a titanic crashing as a boulder went bounding down the slope, and with it a blood-chilling yell that echoed and re-echoed and faded repetitively off into the distance. It sounded like a score of lost souls calling and answering from strategic points up and down both sides of the valley.

What a set of pipes! Garth thought, and stepped off the cliff.

HE COULD FEEL the rod-hard, stretched thread humming in his hands as the gentle night wind stroked it. He hung for a moment, then put one hand before the other. And again. And again. His body began to swing forward and back as he went along the line. He swore under his breath and checked the movement by a swift, synchronized run-and-stop, run-and-stop with his hands.

His shoulders began to ache and he tried to forget it. He hung by one hand for a moment and allowed himself the luxury of bringing the other arm down, flexing the fingers. Hand over hand over hand over hand . . .

He put his hands together and crossed the wrists, so that his body turned to look

back the way he had come. The shadowed cliff he had left was already distant, one with the hill-blackness that surrounded the buildings. He went on. Before and below him, the great tree came closer and closer and closer as he inched along. Too close?

He swung along, arms all but numb, shoulders an agony, hands reduced to two stiffly disobedient hooks that grasped, released, grasped, released, with greater and greater reluctance.

There was some sort of commotion by the building. Someone called out. A Guardian? At that moment he couldn't have defined a Guardian, and wouldn't have cared. The universe was one hand after another.

It came! He had watched for it each second, and when it came it took him totally by surprise. There was the faintest of tugs at his belt as the free end of the line drew tight, and then, far behind him, the thread whipped away from the tree he had left.

He dropped like a nighthawk.

The ground struck his knee a single, stunning blow and then he was hurtling upward toward the eaves of the Hall. He reached the top of his swing and all the strain was suddenly gone from his arms. For a single, terrifying split-second he was afraid his cramped hands would not let go. Then he was free of the line. He concentrated his whole being into keeping his balance, flexing his knees.

The dark roof came up and took him. He gathered the shock in his thigh-muscles, turned one shoulder down and rolled.

Then for a long, luxurious minute he lay still and rested.

AFTER BRONZE shoved the boulder over the edge and roared his terrible challenge into the night, he scuttled like a frightened rabbit through the dark tunnel of a trail that angled down the slope. "Crazy, crazy," he muttered. It couldn't work, that crazy plan of Gesell's. It was marvelous, heroic, brilliant, but—crazy. And he, Bronze, was crazy too, to think of helping. He'd go home. He'd had enough—enough to tell all Prelton about for the rest of his life.

But in spite of his thoughts, his legs carried him cautiously down the slope to the deadly courtyard of Gesell Hall.

"Line," said a low voice.

It was the cowed figure of a Guardian, waiting quietly in the moonlight to unleash hot green death.

"Now I'm going home," thought Bronze, quite coldly and rationally.

He stayed where he was.

Then he saw the other Guardian, moving as if on a track—slowly, steadily, with no hint of a leg-motion—just an inhuman glide. Snails move like that. Centipedes. The stories of monsters from the other side of the Gateway suddenly flooded into his mind.

Bronze saw something else. If the second Guardian moved farther out, away from the Hall, he, Bronze, would be in a straight line between the two of them—

There was an abrupt, intense feeling in his stomach, as if his dinner rabbit had come to life again and had hopped. He rose to his feet. His mouth was dry.

The second Guardian was now out of sight, still moving toward that point which would bracket Bronze in verdant flame.

"Line," said the second voice, and then came the first of the two greatest shocks of Bronze's life.

With a glare of bright white light, a face appeared in midair—twenty feet off the ground—in front of the blank wall of the building.

"Guardian!" sang a deep, organlike voice.

The face was Garth Gesell's.

"Gesell!" gasped a Guardian. Sobbing, he ran toward the light. The other followed slowly. Bronze could begin to see, in the nimbus of light from the radiant face, Gesell's whole body. It hung in the air, perhaps a third of the way down the wall, with one arm thrust forward. The other hand seemed to be behind his back.

"Stop!" intoned the voice. "Remove your habits, Guardians, for I have returned!"

The Guardian from the left faltered, stopped. He stripped off his robe and cast it aside. The other followed suit. The two naked figures moved toward the building, like sleepwalkers. And as they did so, the

shining face slid slowly and majestically to the ground. The Guardians fell to their knees and bowed to the earth at his feet. The light disappeared.

"Bronze?" Garth spoke quietly, but the syllable snapped Bronze out of his awed reverie. He leapt to his feet and sprinted across the wide court, to receive his second mighty shock.

Garth stood erect against the wall, and Bronze realized the stiffness of utter exhaustion in his stance. "Watch 'em," Garth whispered, and turned his flashlight on the two reverent figures.

One of them was a girl.

The long tethered wild horses reared up in Bronze's brain. There was an explosion of desire that jolted him to the marrow. He bent quickly and took her arm. "Stand up, you."

She did.

She looked at him from wide, untroubled eyes. She made no attempt to cover herself or to cover. She met his gaze, and simply waited.

There were two kinds of women on earth—the Escaped, and the Returned. The Escaped had been passed over by the hunting Ffanx—by chance, by luck, by sheer animal cunning on the part of the women or the men who hid them. They had been fair game for the Ffanx while the Ffanx ruled Earth, and they were fair game for any of the hundred-odd men who were left to compete for each of them.

And of the earth's few women, perhaps one in a thousand was Returned. Almost invariably the Ffanx had slaughtered the women. But once in a long, long while they let the woman go. Why, no human ever understood. Perhaps it was capriciousness, perhaps it was done for experimentation. But in the rough ethic of a heterogeneous, dark-age society—all that was left of Earth culture after the Ffanx had conquered and then were destroyed in their turn—these women were sacrosanct. They had paid. Their very existence on the planet was a narrative and a dirge; they were the walking sorrow of earth. And they were not to be touched. It was all that could be done for their loss and their loneliness. They knew it, and they

walked without fear.

The wild horses within Bronze settled. They gentled, quieted, as if some firm, known hand had touched their flaring nostrils.

"Sister," he said, "I'm sorry."

She barely inclined her head. She turned then to Garth and said in a low voice, "What can we do for the master?"

Garth sighed. "I have come a long way. My friend and I need rest. Guard as you always have, and in the morning there will be a new day, and nothing will ever be the same again for any of us."

The girl touched the shoulder of the other Guardian. "Come."

He rose. He was a slender, dark-browed youth with the wild frightened eyes of a chipmunk. He had white flesh and stick-like arms, and a very great dignity. "Master," he said to Garth. In his tone was subservience, but an infinitely proud sense of service rather than a humble one. He and the girl went into the building.

"Sexless," said Bronze. It was an identification only, there was no scorn.

Garth said, "I'm tired."

"You sleep. I'll watch," said Bronze.

"You can sleep too," said Garth. "We're in, Bronze. Really in."

"BRONZE . . ."

The big man was on his feet, weapons in hand, before Gesell's voice had ceased. He cast about the room, saw no immediate menace, and crossed to the bed. "You all right?"

Garth stretched luxuriously. "Never better, though I feel as if my shoulder-joints needed oiling . . . what's for breakfast?"

Bronze went to the door and flung it open, filling his mighty lungs to shout. He didn't. The girl was standing there, waiting.

Garth saw her. "Come in—Good Lord, girl, you must be freezing!"

"I haven't had your permission . . ." she said gravely.

"Go dress. And tell the other Guardian to put on some clothes. What's your name?"

"Viki."

"What's his name—that other Guardian?"

"Daw, Master."

"Good. My name's not Master. It's Garth, or Gesell, whichever suits you. This is Bronze. Is there anything to eat?"

"Yes, Garth Gesell."

Garth pursed his lips. Her intonation of his name was infinitely more adoring, even, than her "Master." He said, "We'll be out in a minute. I want you to eat with us, do you understand? You and the other, both."

"A great honor, Garth Gesell." She smiled, and it did wonders for the fine-drawn austerity of her face.

She waited a moment, and when Garth apparently had nothing more to say, she left. She backed to the door.

Breakfast was an acutely uncomfortable affair. They ate at a small square table in the hall under the portrait of the first Gesell. It might have been a picture of Garth five or ten years older. They had always looked alike.

Viki, now dressed in the conventional short flowing tunic fastened only by a wide belt, sat demure and quiet, speaking only when spoken to, and screening her constant gaze at Garth with her long lashes. Daw stared straight ahead out of round, permanently astonished eyes, and tried hard, apparently, to avoid looking directly at Gesell. Bronze grinned broadly at Garth's discomfiture and ignored the prim looks of the two Guardians.

Garth waited until the meal was finished, and then put his palms down on the table. "We have work to do."

They turned to him so rapidly and obediently that for a moment he lost his train of thought. Bronze looked as if he was about to laugh. Garth shot him a venomous look and said to the Guardians, "But I want you to talk first. I've been away a long time. I want the history of this place as you know it, especially where it concerns the Gateway."

Viki and Daw looked at one another. Garth said, "Come on, come on—"

Daw composed himself, folded his hands on the edge of the table, and cast his eyes down. "In the year of the Ffanx," he intoned, "on the meadows of Hack and Sack, there appeared a blue light shaped like a great arched doorway, filled with a flicker-

ing mist."

"We trust in Gesell," muttered Viki.

"And there came from this archway a creature as long as a hand and as heavy as four times its mass in lead castings. It sniffed at the air, and it took up some soil, and it lifted a box which it held to its head, and it smelled out our women. It called, then; and out of the archway came more of its kind in the hundreds of thousands, wearing strange trappings and bringing machines to work evil. And these were the Ffanx."

"We trust in Gesell," murmured the girl.

Garth opened his mouth to speak, and closed it abruptly. He had a quick ear, and he had rapidly caught the cadences of Daw's voice. No one speaks like that naturally. This wasn't a report, it was a songsong ritual.

"At first the world wondered, at first the world laughed at the Ffanx. For the Ffanx were so tiny, and their ships were like toys, and they spread over Earth without harming a soul, and submitted to capture and acted like comical dolls. They covered the planet and when they were ready—they struck."

He put his head down on his folded hands as he spoke the last two words. Viki droned, "We trust in Gesell."

Daw straightened up and now his voice deepened. His eyes were wide, and fixed on nothing in the room. As he spoke, Garth found himself fascinated by the almost imperceptible motion of Bronze's shaggy head as it nodded in time to the dactylic beat of Daw's speech.

"They struck at our women. They found them in homes and in caves and in churches: killed them by millions. Their weapons were hammers of force from the sky, inaudible sounds that drove strong men to kill their own daughters and slaughter themselves. And then the foul Ffanx would sweep in their bodies.

"And sometimes they herded them, flashing about in their sleek little airships, smashing the men and propelling the foot-weary women along to great pens in the open. They walled them about with their fences of force and destroyed all attacks from outside, and then at their leisure they

killed all our females, this one today and then that one, and two or two thousand tomorrow. And Earth saw its blackest, its sorriest day . . .

"Earth was united in madness."

"We trust in Gesell."

"Gesell was a giant who lived on a hill, a worker of wonders who turned from his works to the solving of problems for Earth. Of all men on Earth, he alone learned the nature of Ffanx and the land whence they came and the spell he could cast to destroy them. It was he who devised a retreat for the women that not even Ffanx could detect. He set up a Gateway and passed women through it—women with beauty and women with mind, and any and all of the women with child who could come to the Gateway.

"And the Earth had turned savage, and men lost their reason and stormed up the hill of Gesell, and they tried to pass into the gateway and get to the women. With some it was hunger, with some it was cowardice. So Gesell, all unwilling, constructed defenses, appointed the Guardians, gave instructions to kill all who came in attack, be they human or Ffanx."

"We trust in Gesell."

"And this is the Word of Gesell:

"Guard the Gateway with your lives. Make no attempt to open it, or the Ffanx will find it and take the treasure it hides. When the time is right, the women will open the Gateway themselves—or I or another Gesell will open it from this side. But guard it well."

"That is the Word of Gesell, and the end of his Word; and he alone knows if there was to be more; for that was the end of Gesell. The Ffanx came and killed him, but dying, he cast a great spell and they died. They died on two worlds and the menace is done with. And Earth is in darkness and waits for Gesell to return, and the Gateway to open. And meanwhile the Word of Gesell is the hope of the world:

"Guard the Gateway."

Daw's voice died away. Bronze sat as if mesmerized. Viki's lips moved silently in the response.

Garth slapped his hand down suddenly, shockingly. "This is going to hurt," he gritted. "Daw, where did that—that reci-

tation come from? Where did it start?"

"It's the Word of Gesell," said Daw, wonderingly. "Everybody—"

"We repeat it morning and night," Viki interposed, "to strengthen us in our duty."

"But whose phrases are they? Who made it up?"

"Garth Gesell, *you must know . . .* or perhaps you are testing us."

"Will you answer the question?"

"I learned it from Daw," said Viki.

"I learned it from Soames, who had it from Elbert and Vesta, who were taught by Gesell himself."

Garth closed his eyes. "Elbert . . . Holy smoke! He was the . . ." He stopped himself in time. He remembered Elbert—a dreamy scholar with whom his father used to have long and delightful philosophical discussions, and who, at other times, pushed a broom around the laboratories. Garth began to see the growth of this myth, born in the poetic mind of a misfit.

He looked into their rapt faces. "I'm going to tell you the same story that you told me," he said flatly, "but without the mumbo-jumbo."

"Gesell was my father. He was a great man and a good one. He was *not* nine feet tall, Bronze. And—" he turned to the Guardians—"he was not a 'worker' of spells."

"Now to your legend. 'The meadows of Hack and Sack' are swampland just south of what used to be, before the Ffanx came, the greatest city on Earth. The real name is Hackensack. The blue arch wasn't magic, it was science—it was the same thing as the Gateway itself, though of a slightly different kind."

"The Ffanx were small and heavy because they came from an area where molecular structure is far more compressed than it is here. And they struck at our women for a good reason. It wasn't viciousness and it wasn't for sport. It was, to them, a vital necessity. And that necessity made it useless to think of driving them off, defeating them. They had to be *destroyed*, not defeated. I won't go into the deeper details of inter-dimensional chemistry. But I want you to know exactly what the Ffanx were after—you'll understand them a lot better."

"There is no great difference, physically, between men and women. I mean, bone structure, metabolism, heart and lung and muscular function are different in quality but not in kind. But there is one thing that women produce that men do not. It's a complex protein substance called extradiol. One of its parts is called extradiol *beta-prime*, and is the only way in which human extradiol differs from that of other female animals. With it, they're women. Without it, they're nothing . . . cold, sexless . . . ruined."

"So it was this substance that the Ffanx were after. You've heard the tales of what they wanted. Women. But they didn't want them as women. They were after *extradiol*—best reason on Earth or off it:

"It made them immortal!"

Bronze's JAW dropped. Viki continued to gaze raptly at Garth. Daw's heavy brows were drawn together in an expression that looked more like fear and worry than perplexity.

"Think about that for a minute. Think of what would happen if we of Earth found a species of animal which carried a substance which would do that for us . . . we'd hunt it ruthlessly and mercilessly."

"Wait a minute," Bronze said. "You mean that these Ffanx couldn't die from a spear-wound?"

"Lord, no—they weren't immortal in that sense. Just from old age which, in any species, is a progressive condition caused by disfunction of various parts—particularly connective tissue. A complicated extract containing human extradiol *beta* would restore the connective tissues of the Ffanx and keep them healthy for thirty of our years or more. Then another shot would keep 'em that way, and so on."

"Just where is the Ffanx world?" asked Daw, and then colored violently as if embarrassed by the sound of his own voice.

"That's a little difficult to explain," said Garth carefully. "Look, suppose that door—" he pointed to an interior doorway—"opened into more than one room. You can almost imagine it; say you'd have to go through the door from an acute angle to get into the first room, go straight through to get into a second. You might call the

second world Parallel X.

"The Gateway and the blue arch at Hackensack were doorways between worlds—between universes. These universes exist at the same time in the same space—but at different vibratory rates . . . I don't expect you to understand it, no one really does. The theory's an old one. No one gave it much consideration until the Ffanx got here."

Bronze asked, "If it's a doorway, like you say, why didn't the Ffanx find the way in to the world where the women went?"

Garth smiled. "Remember the doorway there? Suppose you were quite familiar with the way that door opened to one of two rooms. Then supposing I came along and pointed out that instead of going straight in or turning left, you could go *up* and find yourself in still a third room. It's like that. The Ffanx just never thought of going into their inter-dimensional arch in the particular direction that would wind them up in the Gateway world.

"There was always the possibility that the Ffanx *might* think of it, though, and you can bet that the women were warned and were ready to fight. But to get back to the story—I have to tell it all to you so you can undersand what we're going to do next; and I will have you understand it, because I don't want help from people who just take orders, I want help from people who think.

"All right, let's go on. I'm trying to give you an idea of what my father was—a man who worked and worried and made mistakes and was happy and frightened and brave and, all the other things you are.

"He was a scientist, a specialist in molecular structure. In the early days of the invasion he got hold of a couple of Ffanx. You'll remember that they weren't attacking then. My Dad was the only man who was ever able to communicate with them, and he did it without their realizing what he was doing. A specialist in condensed matter can produce a lot of weird effects. One of the things he found out was that thought itself is a vibration very similar to the brainwaves of a Ffanx-type mind; that is, the currents that produced thought in their brains could be changed directly

into waves his instruments could detect and translate. He got no details, but he did get some broad concepts. One of them was that the blue arch was the only exit that they had ever made from their world; they had never traveled to other planets in their universe. Another was the nature of their quest on Earth. When he found that out, he killed his specimens, but by then it was too late.

"He took those little bodies apart literally atom by atom. And he found out how to destroy them. It was simple in itself, but hard to get to, an isotope of nitrogen which, if released in their world, would set up a chain reaction in their atmosphere. Due to the differences between the molecules of the two universes—they have a table of elements just like ours, but denser—their atmospheric hydrogen could be transmuted to free hydrogen and arsenic trihydride, with a by-product of nitrogen ions that would kick off the reaction again and again . . . I see I'm talking gobbledegook. Sorry.

"Suffice it so say that my father knew what would destroy the Ffanx, but he had to make it himself. By that time the Ffanx had destroyed communications and the world was in chaos. It took time, as he knew it would. So he built the Gateway.

"He got the idea from the Ffanx' own blue arch, which he had seen from a distance. He took careful reading on that strange blue light and guessed what it was. He came back here and proved what it was. And in trying to build another like it—I think he planned to invade them where they didn't expect it—he stumbled on the Gateway.

"It gave a weird red-orange light instead of a blue one, and the atmosphere on the other side was breathable, which the Ffanx world's was not—they had to wear helmets and carry an air-supply while they were on Earth. He went through and looked the place over. There was timber and water and, as far as he could find out, no civilization or dangerous animals—just insects and some little rabbit-like creatures so tame they could be caught by hand. And he got the idea of using it as a sanctuary for the world's women while he worked on the weapon that would destroy the

Ffanx.

"You know the rest of that story—how the women came, all he could send word to—and then how he had to build defenses against the panic-struck, woman-hungry mobs that stormed this place.

"I was just a boy of eight when Dad finished the weapon. It was an innocent-looking eight-inch capsule filled with compressed gas. He planned to go up to Hackensack, traveling at night and hiding in the daytime, and set up a projector to peg it into the blue arch.

"The day after he showed it to me the Ffanx came . . . I'm convinced they didn't know how near they were to the thing that would wipe them out. I'll never know why they came just then . . . maybe there was a party of women on the way up the canyon. Anyway, a flight of their little ships appeared, and they let go one of their force-beams on the lab-building—I guess because it was the nearest to the canyon trail—and stove the roof in. Dad was crushed and the building burned."

Garth took a deep breath. His eyes burned. "I spoke to him while he died. Then I left, with the capsule."

"So it was you who put the poison through the blue arch," said Bronze. "I'd always heard it was Gesell."

"It was Gesell," said Viki devoutly.

"I did, yes. Anyway, when that capsule burst in their world, they had a fine arseniated atmosphere. The hydrogen they breathed was arsenic tri-hydride within minutes after it got to their bloodstreams. I don't know how long it took to kill off every last one of them on their planet, but it couldn't have been long. And it got all the Ffanx here, too. They all had to go back to renew their air supplies. I don't think we'll ever hear of a living Ffanx again."

"And where have you been all these years?"

"Growing up. Studying. Dad's orders. He was the most foresighted man who ever lived. He couldn't be sure of just what would happen in the near future, but he knew what the possibilities were, and acted on all of them. One of the things he did was to prepare a hypnopede—it's a gadget that teaches you while you sleep—no

bigger than your two fists. It was designed for me, in case anything happened, and it covered the basic principles of the Gateway, and a long list of reference books. I lived with that thing, month after month, and when I was old enough to move around safely under my own power I began to travel. I went to city after city and pawed through the ruins of their libraries and boned up on all of it—atomic theory, strength of materials, higher math, electronics—until I could begin to get experimental results."

He looked around the table. "Are you people ready to give me a hand with the Gateway?"

"We took a vow—" said Viki. Garth interrupted her. "Let's have none of that!"

Viki continued with perfect composure. "We took a vow to serve Gesell through life and past death, and I see no reason to change it. Do you, Daw?"

"I agree." Daw's face was strained. Garth thought for a second that Daw was going to argue the point. But perhaps he was wrong . . .

"Good," said Garth. "Now—when the Ffanx destroyed the laboratory, they smashed the Gateway generators, as you know. I think I can restore them. With your help I know I can."

"Hey wait," said Bronze. "What about that prediction that the women would open it from the other side?"

"They're supposed to have the facilities," said Garth. "There's just one piece of evidence we have that proves we've got to do it—they haven't opened the Gateway."

"Why not, d'you suppose?"

Garth shrugged. "Afraid to, maybe. Maybe something's happened to them. Who knows? Let's find out."

Viki spoke up, timidly. "Garth Gesell—it's been years since they went through. Will they be . . . I mean, do you suppose there are . . ." She floundered to a halt.

"Even women in their late thirties and forties can do some good to the world now," Garth answered. "And don't forget—many of them were with child. There'll be new blood for Earth. However, one of the most important considerations is the women themselves. Among them were

some of the best brains on Earth. Architects and doctors, and even a machine-tool designer. But the biggest treasure of all is Glory Rehman. She was my Dad's friendly enemy—almost as good as he was in his specialty, and a lot better in several more. If she's still alive, she'll do more to get the world back on its feet than any thousand people alive today. You'll see . . . you'll see. Come on, let's get to work!"

THE DAYS that followed were a haze of activity. Garth traced the old power-supply, and to his delight found it in prime condition. It had been used for little but the Guardian's flame, all other equipment having been pretty well smashed or gone into disuse. The super-batteries which fed it were neo-tourmaline, a complex crystal that had the power of storing enormous quantities in its facets. Garth's first task was to restore the great sundishes which charged the crystals. His father had designed them to replace the broadcast power that he had used before he developed the condensed-matter crystal.

The Guardians—Garth had abandoned that term, but Bronze still insisted on using it—worked like beavers—Viki worshipfully and silently, Daw in a feverish way which puzzled Garth and angered Bronze. Bronze himself had to be watched to keep him from bossing the others. Garth kept him under control by doubting aloud whether he could do this or that, or by wondering if he was strong enough to move this over to there. "You think I can't" Bronze would mutter, and attack the task as if it were a deadly enemy.

Twice Garth called them all into the new laboratory and announced that the Gateway was ready. The first time nothing happened when he threw the switch, and it took him eight days to trace out the circuits and to test the vibratory controls. The second time a sheet of cool orange flame leaped into being, quivered and flickered for a moment, and then collapsed.

At each of these occasions Bronze berated Garth for letting the Guardians see it. "Here you got them thinking you're a superman," he said disgustedly, "and then you let them watch you pull a blooper."

Garth was alone in the makeshift lab-

oratory when he succeeded. He had bent to replace a crystal which was a few thousandths of a cycle out of phase, and he turned back to the Gateway apparatus—and there it was.

Quietly, noiselessly, it hung there, so beautiful it made him gasp, so welcome he could hardly believe his eyes. It was red-orange at the bottom, shading to gold at the top.

He spun to the switch. It was still open. Then he realized that his synchronization of the quartz frequency-crystals and the tourmaline power-crystals was so perfect that the Gateway had come of its own accord. He had known that the phenomenon was self sustaining, he hadn't known that it was self-starting.

He closed the switch as a safety-measure, and stood looking at the Gateway. "Got it," he muttered. And he could all but feel his father's presence with him, dark eyes glowing, his hand ready with the reward the boy used to prize so highly—the warm clasp of a shoulder.

Garth glanced at the door, thinking of Bronze and the others. Then he shrugged. "Let 'em sleep. They'll need it."

He stepped through the Gateway.

IN HER SMALL, cell Viki slept lightly. She was dreaming about Gesell, as she often did. Her early training with old Soames had been partly hypnopedic, and like most sleep-training, it tended to be restimulated by sleep itself. Part of it pictorialized itself in a dream of the main foyer in Gesell Hall, where the great portrait of Gesell hung. She seemed to be watching the picture, which refused to be a picture of the elder Gesell, but of Garth. And as she watched, the long, white browed face began to turn pale. The face was composed, but the eyes conveyed a worriment that grew into terror and the into agony. As she stared at it, frozen, the dream picture suddenly ripped down the middle with a sound she was never to forget as long as she lived.

She bounded out of bed and stood gasping in the middle of the floor. Her sense of presence returned to her. She glanced around her and then bolted for the door.

In a silent panic she raced for the lab-

oratory, threw the door open.

Between the tall grid-electrodes over which Garth had slaved for so many weeks there was a sheet of flame. Viki stared at it, awed, and then realized what was so very strange about it; it radiated no heat. She approached it cautiously.

On the floor by the lower frame of the apparatus lay a human hand.

She knew that hand. Heaven knows she had spent enough meal-times watching its deft movement from under her lowered lashes. She had seen it probing the complexities of the apparatus often enough, and had marveled at its skilled strength.

"Garth Gesell . . ." she moaned.

She stooped over the hand and only then did she realize that it was thrust through the flame as if through a curtain.

She seized it and pulled. She saw the forearm, the elbow . . . "Bronze!" she screamed. She set her small bare feet against the lower frame and lifted and pulled.

Garth Gesell's body slid out. It was flecked with blood. Blood flowed slowly from his nostrils and ears. His lifeless face held just the expression of terror and agony she had seen in her dream. His flesh was mottled and his lips were blue.

She screamed again, a wordless cry of fury at the fates rather than one of fear. She flipped the body over on its face, turned the head to one side, put her fingers in the unresisting mouth and drew the tongue forward. Then she knelt with her left knee between his thighs and began to apply artificial respiration. "Bronze!" She called again and again, with each measured pressure of her sure hands.

Bronze appeared at the door, looking like a war-horse, his nostrils dilated, his muscular chest gleaming with sweat. "What is—what are you doing to him?" He strode forward, his big hand out to pluck her away from Gesell.

She put her head back and said "Stop." It was said quietly but with such intensity that he halted as if he had run onto a wagon-tongue in the dark. Daw came in, rubbing his eyes.

She ignored the men. She lay down on the floor beside Garth and put her face next to his.

"Viki!" said Daw in horror. "Your vows . . ."

"Shut up," she hissed, and put her mouth against Garth's.

Bronze said "What the hell's she . . ."

"Leave her," said Daw in a new voice.

Bronze's startled expression matched Daw's natural one.

Bronze followed his gaze. Exactly in synchronization, Viki's cheeks and Garth's expanded and relaxed. In the sudden silence, they could hear the breath whistle in Viki's arched nostrils.

"Gesell . . ." whispered Viki hoarsely. She put her mouth against Garth's again.

Suddenly his head jerked back. Feebly, he coughed.

"She did it," muttered Bronze. "Viki—you did it."

Viki rolled like a cat and bounded to her feet. She dipped her hand in a water-bucket and sloshed the freezing mass into the middle of Garth's back. He gasped, a great gulping inhalation, and began to cough again. "Get alcohol," said Viki tightly.

They rolled Garth over and Daw lifted his head. They forced a few drops of ethyl alcohol into Garth's mouth. He shuddered.

"Somebody kissed me," he said. He lay back, breathing deeply. "The . . . Gateway . . . women are dead. It's no use."

"What was it?" asked Daw. "Was the air poisonous?"

"No . . . it was all right—what there was of it. There just wasn't enough. I don't know what caused it, but something has used up most of the air in that world. I passed out before I'd gone any real distance. And the women . . ."

"Didn't you see any signs of them?"

"Not a thing. The world seemed empty. Parallel X . . ."

There was a silence. Then Garth asked, "Well—where do we go from here?"

Daw suddenly leaped to his feet. "Gesell!" he cried. "Great Gesell, forgive me!"

Garth looked up at him curiously. "Daw I've told you a thousand times not to call me—"

"You!" spat Daw. "You—imposter! You apostate! You're the devil! You came here in the guise of the great Gesell in order to invade the sanctuary of Gesell's

women. No Gesell would tire, no Gesell would fail. No Gesell would respond to the clutches of a female."

Bronze was on his feet. "Now, listen, you—"

Daw threw out his skinny arms dramatically. "Go on—kill me: I deserve a hundred deaths for my failure as a Guardian. But I die in defense of Gesell and his works. It's the least I can do." He suddenly flew at Bronze. "Kill me now—kill me!"

Bronze put out one mighty arm and caught the front of Daw's tunic. Daw flailed away helplessly. His arms were far shorter than Bronze's, and all he could do was to rain blows on the iron biceps and kick feebly at the man's boots.

"What shall I do?" said the amazed Bronze. "Shall I squash him?"

"Don't harm him," said Garth. "But I guess you better put him to sleep."

Bronze brought his free hand up and over and put a hammerlike blow on the very top of Daw's head. The little Guardian went limp. Bronze draped him across the crook of his elbow like a spare blanket.

"What about you?" he said to the girl.

Viki stared up at him out of wide eyes and turned to Garth. "I serve Gesell."

Garth said tiredly. "There seem to be three Gesells around here. My Dad, who's dead. Me. And some sort of King Arthur-type myth. Which one are you serving?"

"Only you," she breathed. She rose gracefully, cast a look of utmost scorn at the feebly twitching Daw, excused herself and left the room.

"Let her go," said Garth to Bronze.

"She's liable to blow up the joint," protested Bronze.

"I think not."

"You can be wrong, Garth Gesell."

Garth grinned wryly. "You know that, and still you stick around. I wish these dedicated characters felt the same way. I just can't live up to what they want me to be."

"Maybe you can't," growled Bronze. "But you should. I told you and told you you should." He hefted Daw. "What'll we do with this?"

"Try to talk some sense into him."

"Let me twist his head off first. Then you can put the sense in with a trowel."

Grath chuckled. "That won't be necessary. I know what's wrong with him. Bronze, many people who take readily to dedicated service do it only because it's a substitute for ordinary living, which they don't want to face. That isn't by any means true of all of 'em, but it is of our boy here. Life these days isn't easy, I don't have to tell you that. As a Guardian, Daw had an even, dependable existence where he knew what he had to do and knew exactly how to do it. He saw no reason why that should ever change. And then I came along and reduced him to the level of a guy who is changing his environment a lot now so that it can be changed still more later, and he didn't like it."

"That sounds good. Now can you pound that all into his head with one wallop? Or shall I stand guard over him for a year or so while you lead him by the hand out of a swamp he made himself to wallow in?"

"Easy, easy," said Grath ruefully.

"Damn it, you need it," growled Bronze. "Something's wrong with the Gateway world. Something was wrong with your idea of walking into Gesell Hall that day I met you, but that didn't stop you." Bronze wet his lips. "I guess I'm a little like that Daw, after all. You got to be what I think you should be before I'll play along with you."

THEY FOUND VIKI in the laboratory, staring at the Gateway, which flamed and flickered coldly in its frames. Garth and Bronze ranged up beside her.

"If we could only move around in there," said Garth. "If we could only know what happened to the air-pressure."

"The Ffanx did it," said Viki.

"Let him do the thinking, sister," said Bronze with the odd combination of bluntness and courtesy he affected with her.

"There are no more Ffanx, Viki," said Garth. "If I'm sure of anything, I am sure of that."

"I know that," said Viki. "I mean that the Ffanx moved from dense air into rarefied air—you said so."

Garth struck himself a resounding wallop on the forehead. "Bronze," he said in an awed tone of voice, "she has the

brains."

"Huh?"

"Air helmets! Here I was so defeated that I couldn't see the one thing that was staring me in the face. Come on. The machine shop!"

The helmets they turned out in the next few days were makeshift but serviceable. Using the domed tops of aluminum pressure tanks and a series of welded bands, and a tightly-gasketed piece of plexiglas, they had the basic design. Soft, thick edging of foam rubber sealed the shoulder, chest and back. The air supply was liquid air passed through a tiny but highly efficient chemical heater. "We want no oxygen drunks on this trip," Garth explained.

They locked Daw up in the north storeroom. Garth tried to talk to him but found him completely intractable. He was like a man in a trance. He would speak only to the original Gesell, using his name to call down maledictions on the heads of the imposters.

"What shall we take with us?"

They stood before the Gateway—Bronze impatient and excited, Garth thoughtful, Viki her reserved, willing self. Green floodlights and a smoke generator had been strategically placed on the defense line in the canyon, keyed to the detectors so that any intruder would be badly frightened if he came onto the Court. It was defense enough for the short time they planned to be away.

"My spears," said Bronze.

"No," Garth said. "Take this instead." He tossed over his old blaster. "It's more compact. I mean no insult to that throwing arm of yours, little man, but the blaster has a little more range."

"Thanks." Bronze turned it over admiringly. "Did I ever tell you that if you hadn't been carrying this when I first met you I'd have knocked you off? I never met a man with one before."

Garth laughed. "I hadn't had charges for it for more than four years. It was good protective coloration. But there are plenty of charges now. Viki—"

"I have my dagger. And an extra oxygen tank."

"Good. I'll take two extra tanks. That ought to hold us.

"Now here's the plan. We have no radio. I was able to weld in some thin plates to my helmet—I should be able to hear in there. I don't think you two will be able to unless you touch helmets. I won't be able to hear you but I can hear outside sounds. So once we get in there, we're pretty much on our own. All I can say is—keep together and don't go too far. Mind you, this is just a preliminary recon patrol. Later we can go back in with more and better equipment. Ready?"

Bronze raised a thumb and forefinger in the ancient sign.

"Right!" Viki nodded tensely.

Garth wheeled, settled his helmet down on its shoulder-pieces. The others followed suit.

Then Garth plunged through the Gateway.

THE THREE HUDDLED together as they emerged from the Gateway.

They found themselves on a stony plain that stretched out and away as far as the eye could reach. There were the looming shadows of distant, tremendous mountains. The rocks were soft and coarse, and of the same orange-to-gold shading that characterized the Gateway.

Garth glanced around at the Gateway, and understood how in his previous visit he had missed it. It flickered and flamed as dimly as a candle in the sunlight. He touched his two companions and pointed back at it. They nodded, and he knew they understood the need for caution. In that wilderness of boulders it would be easy to lose it completely.

He recalled the first Gateway, his father's, which had debouched on a flat plain, smaller than this. There had been rocks here and there, but nothing like the monstrous, crumbling boulders which surrounded them now. He wondered, as he had many times in the past few days, if the elder Gesell's specifications had been wrong in some subtle way, and if this was, as Bronze had suggested, a different dimensional world from that to which the women had been sent. In the maze of advanced mathematics involved in the construction of a Gateway, any small slip might have far-reaching results.

His thought broke off abruptly. Through the two thin discs welded into the sides of his helmet he could hear a highpitched, shattering roar. He looked up—

It was a helicopter—but such a machine as a mad aeronautical engineer might dream of in a nightmare!

It was huge and it was slow. It was altogether too slow. Its great blades had a radius of nearly two hundred feet. It settled downward much faster than it seemed to, for its size was so deceptive; the vanes rotated no faster than the wings of an ancient Dutch windmill.

It came to rest a hundred yards away. Its size was incredible. As it rested on the ground, the roof of the fuselage was all of eighty feet from the ground. The door opened.

Garth swept the helmets of the other two against his with one motion. They contacted with a deafening clang.

"Hide!" he barked. "In the rocks . . . get out of sight!"

He turned and dove for shelter. Just to his right a huge flat rock, which had apparently once stood on edge, leaned over at about eighty degrees. Under it was just enough space for him to slide into with his helmet protruding.

He looked first for his companions. Bronze was huddled behind a round boulder. Viki was running back toward the Gateway, zigzagging in a panic-struck search for adequate shelter. He saw her trip and fall, and an airtank went bounding away from her shoulder. She rose groggily to her feet and tried to run again.

Garth looked back toward the helicopter. What he saw confirmed the surge of fear he had experienced as its door had opened.

Four women approached with great leaping strides. They were dressed in odds and ends—a ragged halter, a smooth tunic, a slashed skirt. Each was dressed differently and casually. One carried a monstrous knobbed club. All were belted and had long daggers. Around the neck of the leader was a black chain from which swung a mighty jewel, which glowed and sparked in the universally orange-gold light. The jewel was brilliantly, shockingly green—the characteristic glittering green of neo-tour-

maline. But Grath had never seen a crystal of that size. It was gem-cut, and must have been all of forty inches from crown to apex. And the woman carried it comfortably at the end of its ten-foot stick-like mounting, on its chain with links the size of anchor-cable, because she herself was seventy-five feet tall.

GARTH WAS CONSCIOUS of a pounding in his ears. At first he thought it was the earth-shaking tread of the four giantesses—for the other three were almost as tall as the first. Then he realized that the pounding was caused by the simple fact that in his shock he had forgotten to breathe.

He turned and looked for his companions. Bronze was slack and awed, gaping skyward at the leader's tremendous head. Viki was nowhere to be seen—

And neither was the Gateway. It was gone.

The leader stopped not twenty yards away, and bent, scanning the ground, fingering her jewelled pendant. Her face was distant, composed and cool. She was very beautiful, with long-lashed eyes and high-arched brows and a complexion like unveined marble.

"Bronze!" Garth screamed, for the second woman, a blonde with masses of flowing golden hair, had circled, and was behind Bronze as he stared up at the leader. The blonde raised her club, a thirty-foot mass that must have weighted all of a ton. She spoke—a deep, unintelligible strumming. Bronze, of course, could not hear Garth's cry of warning.

The leader straightened up and glanced at the blonde. She said something equally incomprehensible—the frequency of their voice-tones was down in the subsonic—and the blonde reluctantly put down the club.

And then, to Garth's horror, the leader bent and shot out a mighty hand. Bronze tried to scuttle aside, but the hand closed on him, lifted him high in the air.

Then it was that Garth recognized the giantess. He knew he had seen that cool, beautiful face before—long, long before, when he was a child.

Bronze squirmed and fought that gigantic grip. Garth saw him twist free, ball

up and kick with both feet at the huge thumb. He slipped out of the grasp when the hand had carried him forty feet in the air. The giantess fell to one knee and reached out, catching him deftly. She held him up before her great calm face and watched him squirm.

Bronze suddenly struck out with both hands, twisted to one side, and got his hand on the blaster.

"Don't Don't" screamed Garth. He knew what that blaster could do at short range. But his raging was useless, he could not be heard.

The giantess fumbled for a second and then, with her left hand, brought up the pendant by its stick-like handle. She held the jewel close to Bronze as if it were a strange magnifying glass.

Bronze whipped the blaster out and up, and just as it bore on the huge, calm face, the great thumb moved on a stud on the handle of the jewel-mounting.

A blaze of green fire reached out from the jewel and enveloped Bronze's chest, turning to dazzling white where it struck him. The jewel deepened in color and seemed to thicken, to grow more solid.

The magnetic buckles of Bronze's helmet harness suddenly parted, and the internal pressure did the rest. The helmet popped off his head and flew up and around, swinging by the one back strap that was caught between his waist and the imprisoning hand.

Then the blaster spoke.

"Don't!" screamed Garth uselessly. That's Glory Gehman!"

But instead of the shattering roar he expected, his ear-plates detected only a muffled f-f-ft! A weak tongue of fire, perhaps ten or twelve inches long, flickered wanly from the bore of the blaster, and then faded. Bronze writhed once, then went limp.

The great figure that looked like Glory Gehman held Bronze up like a tiny limp doll and called to the other women. They crowded around. The blond reached with long, delicate fingers and lifted up the dangling helmet, pointed at Glory Gehman's ears. Garth noticed for the first time that her ear-pendants were made of Ffanx helmets, or rather a tremendously over-

size version of them. The leader shook her head and laughed, and gently forced Bronze's helmet back on his head. Holding her face very close, as if she were threading a needle in bad light, she set the buckle-magnets back in their grooves and gently tested the airlines. Then the leader walked off toward the helicopter, while the other three resumed their search of the ground.

Garth's eye caught a glint of metal a few yards away—the spare airtank Viki had dropped. But of Viki there was no sign, and gone, too, was the Gateway.

Garth Gesell was alone on this earth, a pygmy hiding under a rock like a beetle, while he was being hunted by colossi obviously bent on destroying his kind.

A great bare foot pressed the earth close to him. He could hear the stones crackle. He crept farther back in the narrow fissure which held him. He knew that the next step the giantess took might be on top of that flat rock, and that would be the end of Gesell on any world save for a revered memory.

And a fat lot of good the reverence would do him as he lay crushed under a rock.

"FOR GESELL," sang Daw as he hooked the cable around the frame of the Gateway. Then something struck his back and side and sent him sprawling. He kept his hold on the cable as he fell, and part of him was gratified to feel it catch on the frame. He knew it had contacted, and he knew it without looking at the Gateway for the flickering gold light was abruptly gone.

He rolled and came up on one knee.

Lying on the floor, doubled up in pain as she nursed a bleeding foot, was Viki. She squeezed her eyes as tight as they would shut, even through the thick transparent plastic of her helmet Daw could see the silent tears she forced out.

She sat up and looked around her, then sprang to her feet and leaped to the framework. That brought her up against the rear wall of the laboratory. She stood for a moment feeling it with incredulous fingers, then turned and stepped out again.

Apparently it was only then that she saw

Daw.

She slid the magnetic buckles apart and wrenched off her helmet. Her hair and eyes were wild.

"Daw. The Gateway!"

"A false Gateway for a false Gesell," intoned Daw.

She looked around at the dead framework again, and then at Daw. "What are you doing here?"

"The hand of Gesell freed me for his good works," said Daw. "I found a weak spot in the ceiling of the storeroom. Now, more than ever, I know the truth and reason behind my act. For you were spared, sister, spared from your own infamies, and saved, as a sworn Guardian, for the true Gesell."

She looked at him, bewildered.

He explained to her, patiently, exultantly. "You were led to return from the company of evil, just as I obeyed Gesell's command to do away with the false Gateway."

"Return? I didn't return!" she said frantically. "I fell. I was running, looking back and up at—at—" She closed her eyes and shuddered. "And then I hurt my foot, and fell . . . Daw what has happened to the Gateway?"

"Gone," he said, and smiled. "And good riddance. Come, sister. Let us go to the great portrait and receive more messages."

"Daw, we've got to fix it! He's in trouble. They'll kill him, they'll kill him."

"You confirm it. Death to the imposter! It is Gesell's will!"

Understanding dawned on Viki. "You closed it?"

He bowed his head. "It was the wish of Gesell. I am but a poor instrument . . ."

She was on him like a tiger-cat. "You fool! You crazy, blind fool! Show me what you did. We've got to fix it. We've got to, Daw. Garth Gesell is the true Gesell, don't you understand? And he'll die in there if we don't help him!"

"That Gateway," said Daw in stentorian tones, "is a falsehood, a devil's trick. When Gesell wants it to open he will open it, without wires and crystals and steel. As a Guardian I shall see the end of this contraption, and never again will I be duped." He turned, his eyes blazing, and caught

up a sledge hammer. "Never again will there be a Gateway in Gesell Hall until Gesell himself opens it!"

"Daw you're mad! Stop!"

HE STALKED past her. She took one step after him and stopped. She saw the hooked piece of cable Daw had dropped. She leapt forward, caught up the free end, and as Daw raised the hammer high over his head, his right foot placed itself near the hook.

Viki stepped to one side, to be sure of a good contact, and pulled the cable violently. The hooked end caught Daw's ankle, whipped it out from under him. He staggered, lost control of the hammer. The twelve-pound head fell toward him. He lurched aside and it caught him on the shoulder. He fell heavily, trying to turn. His jaw cracked against the stone floor.

He lay still, uttering a series of tortured sounds as he tried to pull himself together.

Viki stood over him like an avenging angel, waiting.

Daw rolled over, sat up. His hand went quivering to his shoulder. He looked up at her out of round, bloodshot eyes.

"Guardian . . ." he said.

"Help me fix the Gateway, Daw," she said.

"You're misled, sister."

"I won't discuss it with you. And don't start that cant about my sacred duty. Get up!"

Daw rose and fixed her with his mad eyes. "I am counselled by Gesell," he said painfully, "and now I counsel you."

She closed her eyes in a visible effort at self-control. "Are you going to help me?"

"Why do you pursue this folly? What is the compulsion of this—this Garth?" The last word came out with contempt.

"I love him," she said.

There was a crashing silence. It was the silence of utter shock—the silence of death itself, for indeed nothing moved, not even breath.

Finally Daw's suddenly white lips moved, slackened, moved again. "You love him," he whispered. "You?"

She was just as pale. "We all have our own kind of cowardice," she said. "Bronze once told me what Garth Gesell thought of

your madness. He said you were a Guardian because you had retired from a real world. You've gone mad trying to save the old ways for yourself. You can doom the world to the new savagery if by doing it you can return to patrolling the Court and humbling yourself before the portrait."

Daw half raised his arms as if to ward off her hot words. He kept his eyes fixed on her, and when she stopped he said only, "You're Escaped!"

"Yes!" she cried, "Damn you! You never knew, did you? One of the rules you made up for yourself was that only the poor robbed hulk of a woman, with her womanhood completely gone, could become a Guardian. It's what you chose to believe and what I let you believe. I told you we all have our form of cowardice. Mine was to pretend I was Returned. I stole the privilege of those poor creatures who had been discarded by the Ffanx. I lived with them and learned their ways. They walk in safety all over the world, and I took their coloration. And when the chance came to hide further under the cowl of a Guardian, I took it. I let myself sleep safely here. But I'm awake now . . ." Her lower lip became full, and her eyes grew very bright. ". . . awake and I love him, I love him, I love him . . ."

She lapsed into silence. She heard Daw grind his teeth.

"Slut!" he said hoarsely. "To think that for these years I've been living next to a—a—" In his mounting rage he stopped using words, and instead uttered a series of creaking, dripping animal sounds.

"Now that we know what we are, Guardian," she said coldly, "Let's fix the Gateway."

"I am the Guardian and I am the Gateway, and in me alone is the trust, the duty, the fidelity, the—"

Suddenly he was upon her, raging. Gone was the last vestige of control. Gone was the carefully schooled impersonality of Guardian behavior, gone was the deeply conditioned, pitying reverence for the woman Returned.

His wild leap bowled her off her feet. They rolled over and over on the floor. Daw didn't strike out at her with fists;

he clawed. He pulled her hair and her clothes. He raked his fingernails down her body, twisted her, grasped and clutched and pawed.

At first she tried to get away, to protect herself. She writhed and scrambled and fell and pushed at him. Suddenly he was kneeling by her, both hands full of her hair, both arms stiff, pinning her head down to the floor. The pain of her scalp turned to terror—a roweling primitive terror that was like nothing she had ever known in intensity. And in the briefest moments it was surpassed by another, new emotion. She had been afraid before, in her life, but this was something different.

For as he bent over her, brought his face close to her, she looked up into his eyes. They were round, staring, veined and toned with red. His jaws were open, and his bitten, bloody tongue flashed insanely in and out. Blood and froth splashed on her face, and at its touch, this transcending new emotion overtook her like a great flood-tide.

It was more than horror. It was disgust and revulsion raised to a peak almost impossible to contain. In one great surge she rose. She felt her hair tear away with a kind of savage joy. How she found the holds she never was to know, but one slim hand fastened into the side of Daw's neck and the other on his thigh. She sprang straight up under him with her feet solidly planted and every dyne of energy in her healthy legs, back and shoulders behind the movement. Daw's body went straight up.

When the weight came off her hands he was nearly at arm's length over her head. She dug in her nails and kept her grip, and as he began to fall she pulled hard with her left hand, which was on his neck. Head down he hurtled, with all her convulsive strength speeding him on his way. He struck . . .

For a long time she stood like a cast-iron statue, her unseeing eyes on the thing which lay there, its misshapen head all but concealed, twisted grotesquely under the scrawny body. Then she became dimly conscious of an ache that became a pain that became a roaring agony—the knotting muscles in her calves, cramping with the

onset of nervous shock. She tottered backwards, brought up against the wall.

She crouched there, breathing in great open-throated gasps. Suddenly she began to cry—high, squeaky crying that tore her throat and burned her eyes. She cried for a long time.

But the next day, and the next and the next, found her working.

GARTH LAY UNDER the rock, his heart beating suffocatingly, but his eyes studying the amazing spread of caloused flesh that was the giant foot. Another came down beside it, and the first one lifted and kicked over a massive boulder nearby. Garth felt his sheltering rock vibrate alarmingly. He bunched his shoulders and waited.

At last the feet moved away. He edged out and lay prone, hardly daring to lift his head. The three women were working away from him, scanning the ground carefully. He got on all fours and scuttled backward into the shadow of a projecting rock, pulled himself to his feet and looked around.

The Gateway was gone. Viki was gone—probably through the Gateway, he surmised. Bronze was gone—captured certainly, dead probably. He wondered what that green fire had been. It looked like neotourmaline, but the rays had not burned Bronze's body, at least not as far as he had been able to see. It was a little like the damper crystals that his father had developed, to capture and store energy.

But a crystal as big as that, with the pulling power it must have, couldn't be turned on a human being without snuffing out the man's tiny store of electro-chemical.

"Bronze . . ." he said aloud.

Big, bluff, faithful Bronze, with his quick temper and his hammer-thinking. Garth got a flash of memory—Bronze's face when Garth had pulled him up short, pointing out some end result of Bronze's impulsiveness. He used to get a puzzled, slightly hurt expression on his broad face, but he always began nodding his head in agreement before he had figured out if Garth was right or not.

Garth's eyes felt hot. Then, with a pro-

found effort of will, he shut his mind to his regrets and concentrated on his surroundings.

Moving carefully, he worked his way over to the spare tank that Viki had dropped. He worried it in between the two tanks he already carried. He'd live a little longer with it. "Though what for," he muttered, "I wouldn't know." He gave a last, despairing glance to the site of the Gateway and began to move toward the distant helicopter.

A hundred feet away he found a leaf—a tremendous thing, eleven feet long and nearly five feet broad at its widest. He picked it up gratefully. It was very light and spongy. He pulled the stem over his shoulder and walked through the rocks, dragging it. The leaf was almost exactly the color of the soil, and ideal camouflage. All he need do would be to drop it flat and pull it over himself.

He was two-thirds of the way to the plane when a thudding from the earth warned him. He looked back and saw the three women coming up rapidly. They seemed to be sauntering, but their stride was twenty to twenty-five feet, and they covered ground at a frightening pace. He dropped and covered himself. The steps came nearer and nearer, until he wondered how the earth itself stood up under that monstrous tread. Then they were past. He got up. They walked with their heads up, talking their booming syllables. They were obviously searching no longer.

He began to run. He had no choice except to stay with these creatures. What he would do, where he would go if they took off, he simply did not know.

They climbed into the cabin, one by one. He could see the landing gear—tremendous wheels as tall as a two-story house—spread as they took the weight of the giants.

There was a belly-thumping cough and the incredible rotor-blades began to turn.

Garth flung down his leaf and ran straight toward the ship, trusting to luck that he wouldn't be seen. When he was under the slow-whirling tips of the rotor he still had what seemed an impossible distance to run. He found some more energy somewhere and applied it to his

pumping legs.

A tire lost the swelling at the base that indicated weight-bearing. It lifted free. Garth swerved slightly and made for the other. It leapt upward as he approached. He ran despairingly under it. Only the nose-wheel was left. Without slackening speed he rushed it. Fortunately it was smaller than the others—the rim of the wheel was only about as high as his collarbone when the tire rested on the ground. But it was off the ground when he got there. He grunted with effort and made a desperate leap.

His outthrust arm went through the lightning hole just as the wheel jerked upward. He crooked his elbow grimly as his momentum swung his flailing legs under the tire. Then he got his other arm through the hole. It was just big enough for his head and the upper part of his shoulders. The air-tanks kept him from wriggling further.

Then, to his horror, he saw the strut above him fold on a hinge.

The wheel was retractable!

He had to turn his whole body to look upward through his helmet-glass, and somehow he managed it. He had no way of gauging how deep the wheel recess was. Was it deep enough to accept the wheel—and him too?

He looked down.

It would have to be deep enough . . . the craft was a hundred feet up and rising rapidly!

He doubled up and got one toe on the edge of the lightning hole. He could just grasp the fork of the wheel. He swarmed up it, caught the other arm of the fork and lay belly down on the top part of the tire-tread. Then the wheel was inside, and the great bayflaps swung closed. The inside of the recess touched his back, squeezed, and stopped.

He couldn't move but he wasn't crushed.

IT WAS NIGHT.
Garth crouched by a building the size of a mountain. It was built of wooden planks that looked like sections of a four-lane highway.

He tried to forget the flight, though he knew it would haunt him for years—

the cramped position, the slight kink in his airhose and the large kink in his neck which had caused such misery, and finally the horror of the landing, when the wheel he clung to had contacted and rolled. Stiff as he was, he'd had to hit the ground ahead of it and leap out of the way.

He moved along the wall, looking for a way in. He would try the doorways as a last resort, for not only were they at the top of steps with seven-foot risers but they were flooded with light.

He stumbled and fell heavily into a dark hollow scooped out at the ground line. It was about four feet deep. He got to his knees, caught a movement in the dim light, and froze. Before him was a black opening through which he could see the bright-yellow stripes of artificial light seeping between enormous floorboards. And in the dim light he was aware of something which crouched beside him in the dark. It was horny and smooth, and at one end two graceful, sensitive whips trembled and twirled.

It was a cockroach, very nearly as long as his leg.

He wet his lips. "After you, friend," he said politely.

As if it had heard him, the creature flirited its antennae and scuttled into the hole. Garth drew a deep breath and followed.

It was black and brilliant, black and brilliant under that floor. Twice he fell into holes, and one of them was wet. Filthy and determined, he explored further and further, until he lost all sense of direction. He didn't know where the entrance hole was and he no longer cared very much. He knew what he was looking for and at last found it.

Near one wall was a considerable hump on the rough earth floor he walked on. A wide, oval patch of light above showed the presence of a tremendous knot-hole. He climbed toward it.

The wood was soft under his fingers, like balsa. He began tearing out chunks of it, widening the knothole. The earth here was about three feet under the hole, so he had to squat and work upward. It was extremely tiring but he kept at it until he had a hole large enough to put

his head through.

Because of the small size of his helmet glass, he had to put his head almost all the way up before he could see anything. And because of the brilliance above, he had to stay there a moment to accustom his eyes to the glare—What he saw made him, for the first time in his life, fully understand the phrase "And when I looked, I thought I was going to faint!"

He dropped back down the hole and lay gasping with reaction. One of the giantesses was sitting on the floor, propped up by one arm stretched out behind her. And he had busily dug his hole and thrust out his head exactly between her widespread thumb and forefinger!

He sat up and looked about him very carefully indeed. He followed the mammoth outline of the girl's shadow, where it crossed the lines of light between the floorboards. And then he lay back patiently to wait until she moved.

He must have dozed, and in the meantime become immune to the thunderous shuffling and subsonic bellowings of the creatures above, for when he opened his eyes again the shadow was gone. He knelt and cautiously put his head up through the hole.

THE FLOOR stretched away from him like a pampa. There were eight or nine of the huge women in the room, as far as he could see. Several were in a stage of dress which, under different circumstances, he might have found intriguing.

He pressed up harder. The tanks caught on the edge of the hole. He gritted his teeth and pushed with his legs under the floor and his arms above. He felt the wood yield under his hands. Then the tanks ripped their way through and he was at last in the room.

He backed cautiously up to the baseboard, darting glances in every direction. Making sure that none of the women was looking in his direction, he darted for the only patch of shadow he could see—a loose-hung fishnet that covered a window, serving as sort of a drape. He slid behind it and peered through the mesh. It seemed to be indifferent concealment; yet,

from their point of view, he knew he would be hard to locate.

He paused to switch tanks—his air was getting foul—and then took stock.

The women were gathered around a table near the center of the room, rumbling and gesticulating in their strange, slow-motion fashion. None were looking his way. He looked down to the right. A small table stood in the corner and there was another fishnet behind it. Garth moved toward it, passing one leg which was like a redwood tree and, reaching up, twined his hands in the wide mesh of the drape. It sagged alarmingly as his weight came on it. He waited until it was still and then climbed up a few feet. Putting both feet into the mesh he jumped hard to test it. It sagged again, but held.

To the underside of the table seemed the longest thirty feet he had ever determined to travel, but he started up. The fishnet seemed to stretch a foot for every eighteen inches he climbed. He looked down and saw it touch the floor, then begin piling up.

He suddenly remembered the incredible density of the tiny Ffanx invaders, and a great light dawned in his brain.

Excitedly he climbed higher, higher, and at last reached the table top. He swung onto it, teetered for a hair-raising moment on the edge, recovered his balance, and stood on the wooden surface. Sure enough, his footprints showed on the table top as he walked away from the edge.

There was a piece of electrical equipment on the table, which he ignored. He went to the far edge, crouched by the side of the machine, and gazed across to the center table around which the giants were gathered.

His blood froze.

Under a glaring floodlight, in the center of the enormous table, lay a sealed glass cage. Lying in it, devoid of his helmet, lay Bronze's body. The leader, the one who looked so very much like Glory Gehman, was handling the delicate controls of a remote-apparatus which passed a series of rods through pressure sleeves into the cage. At the end of the rods were clamps, clumps of white material as rough as coconut fibre, tweezers, a sway, and a gleam-

ing scalpel as long as a two-handed sword.

If they're being that particular about atmosphere, he thought, Bronze must be alive!

The flood of joy this thought brought him died a quick death, for it was followed by . . . and they're about to vivisection him.

He yielded to a short moment of panic and despair. He rushed back toward the drape as if to slide down it and attack the women by force. He stopped, then got hold of himself.

He looked around him. Suddenly, he straightened and smiled. Then he went into furious action.

"Isn't he pretty!"

The women gathered about the tiny figure. "We shouldn't cut him up until the rest of the girls have a chance to look at him. He's just a doll!" said one.

"You've forgotten that all the Ffanx are just dolls," said the leader coolly. "Do you propose to lead thirty-two hundred women, one by one, past this little devil? You'd have a wave of hysteria I'd as soon not have to handle. Let's keep to ourselves what we have here. We'll learn what we can and file it away."

"Oh, you're so duty-bound," said the blonde petulantly. "Well, go ahead if you must."

They crowded closer. The leader propped her elbows on the table to steady her hands, and carefully manipulated the clamps. One descended over each thigh of the tiny figure and trapped it firmly to the floor of the cage. Two more captured the biceps, and another pair settled over the wrists. Then the scalpel swung up and positioned itself. The leader suddenly stopped.

"Did you leave that thing on?"

In unison they swung toward the corner. One of the women walked over and looked. "No, but the tubes are warm."

"It's a warm night," said another. "Go ahead. Cut."

They gathered about the table again. The blade turned, descended slowly.

"STOP!" roared a voice—a deep, masculine voice.

"A man!" squeaked one of the women. Another quickly drew her tunic together and belted it. A third squeaked "Where?

Where? I haven't seen a man in so long I could just—"

"Glory Gehman!" said the voice. "Hal-ly Gehman—short for 'Hallelujah'—remember?"

"Gesell!" gasped the leader.

"The fool," growled the blonde. "I knew a man wouldn't be able to leave us alone. This is his idea of a joke—but he set up the Gateway to play it. No wonder these little devils got through." She raised her voice. "Where are you?"

The blonde snapped her fingers. "It's a broadcast of some sort," she said. "He hasn't answered you once, Glory!" She turned to the corner. "What's my name, Dr. Gesell?"

There was a pause. Somewhere there was a squeaky sound, like the distant shattering of a field creature. "Everybody calls you Butch, towhead," said the voice. "Come over here, tapeworms."

"The recorder!"

They raced across the room, clustered around the small table.

"I thought you said it was turned off? Look—the tape's moving!" Glory reached out a hand to turn it off.

"Don't turn it off," said the voice. "Now, listen to me. You've got to believe me. I'm Gesell. No matter what you see, no matter what you think, you've got to understand that. Now, hear me out. You'll get your opportunity to test my identity after I'm finished."

"No one but Gesell ever called me Hal-ly," said Glory.

"Shh!" hissed the blonde.

"I'm right here in this room, and you'll see me in a moment. But before you do, Glory, I want to spout some math at you.

"Remember the vibratory interaction theory of matter? It hypothesized that universes interlock. Universe A presents itself for x duration, one cycle, then ceases to exist. Universe B replaces it; C replaces B; D replaces C, each for one micromilli-sub- n -second of time. At the end of the chain, Universe A presents itself again. The two appearances of Universe A are consecutive in terms of an observer in Universe A. Same with B and C and all the others. Each seems to its observers to be continuous, whereas they are

actually recurrent. All that's elementary. "Here are the formulae for each theoretical universe in a limited series of four inter-recurrent continua . . ."

There followed a series of mathematical gobbledegook which was completely unintelligible to everyone in the room but Glory Gehman. She listened intently, her high-arched brows drawn together in deep thought. She drew out a tablet and stylus from her pocket and began to calculate rapidly as the voice went on.

"Now notice the quantitative shift in the first phase of each cycle. To achieve an overall resonance there has to be a shift. To put it in simple terms, if you drew an hyperbolic curve with a trembling hand, the curve is the overall resonance of the whole series of small cyclic motions. And there's only one way in which that can have a physical effect—in the continuum itself. Each cycle occurs in a slightly altered condition of space-time. That accounts for the super-density of the Ffanx and everything they owned and handled. What was normal to us was rarefied to them. We saw them as dense little androids, and they saw us as rarefied-molecule giants. There must be some point in the cycle where they are rarefied in terms of our condition. But space characteristics are only part of the continuum. The time-rate must alter with it.

"According to my calculations you have been here for something more than seven but less than eight-and-a-half months, and are waiting with considerable patience for the three-year minimum it would take to prepare the cyanide capsule for the Ffanx world.

"It's with mixed feelings that I inform you that the Ffanx war was over twenty-two earth years ago. Dr. Gilbert Gesell died in a Ffanx raid that closed the Gateway. The Gateway has been opened again momentarily but something has gone wrong with it—I don't know what. I must tell you too that in terms of Earth standard you cute cuddly creatures are in the neighborhood of seventy-five feet tall.

"So check your figures before you fly off the handle and kill any small, dense creature which arrives through a Gateway wearing a breathing helmet. It might be

Dr. Gesell's little boy Garth, grown up to be all of seven inches tall, and recording into your tape at its highest speed and playing it back slowly . . ."

"I'm clinging to the fishnet just under the level of the table-top. Treat me gently, sisters. I've come a long way."

There was a concerted lunge for the drape, a concerted reaction of horror away from it. "Ffanx," someone blurted. "Kill it!"

"We have to kill it," said the blonde. "We can't take chances, Glory." Behind her voice was the concentrated horror of the conquest of Earth . . . the forcefield pens . . . the hollow, piteous presence of the handful of "returned" women. "This could be a new Ffanx trick, a new weapon . . ."

"The math is . . ."

"The hell with the math!" screamed a girl from the edge of the crowd.

"She's right!"

"She's *right*!"

"Kill it!"

GARTH STEPPED over to the table top and walked toward the tape-machine. The circle of women widened instantly. Garth muscled the huge controls, placed his helmet firmly against the microphone, and chattered shrilly as the tape raced through the guides. Then he re-wound, stopped the spools, and began the playback:

"I got that, and I must say I expected it. You'll follow your own consciences in the end, but be sure it's your conscience and not your panic that you follow. I want to tell you this, though Earth is a mess. There's a new dark age back there. It's slipped into a tribal state—polyandrous in some places, feudal in others, matriarchal in many. You three thousand women, and the daughters that many of you will bear, will mean a great deal to Earth."

The chattering ran high.

"Polyandrous?"

"One woman—several husbands."

"Lead me to it! Poly wants an androus!"

"If he's seven inches high here, we'd be seventy-five feet tall there. Oh my!"

Garth's voice cut in. "You'll want to know how you can get back to Earth size,

or how to get to Earth when its size corresponds to yours. I can tell you. But I'm not going to. If you can argue about my life, I can bargain with it."

A pause. "Now tell me if you've killed that boy over there." Slyly, Garth added, "Go look at him again. He's six-three, and a hundred and two percent man."

One, two, two more drifted over to the big table, to look with awed eyes at the magnificent miniature.

Glory, as if sensitive to a voice-tone she had noticed, snatched up the mike. "No, he isn't dead. He would have been, but he fired with a blaster just as I put the neotourmaline soaker field on him. The blaster threw out all the energy the crystal could absorb."

Garth held up his arms for the mike. When his voice came again, it said, "Glory, get together the best math minds you have here. I want to give you some raw material to work on."

There was a sudden crash of sound. To Garth it was a great thudding bass that struck at his helmet like soft-nosed bullets. To the women it was a shrill siren-alarm.

Glory yelled, "Get the 'copter warm. Asta, Marion, Josephine this time. Jo—check the transistor leads on the direction finder in the plane. It kept losing a stage of amplification this morning." She turned to the microphone. "That's a Gateway. We'll damn soon find out whether the Ffanx war is over or not. I'm going to park you with your friend there. Just pray that these cats will obey orders while I'm gone." She dropped the mike and raced to the big table. "Butch. Put that one in with the other. If you touch either one of them until I get back, so help me I'll pry you loose from your wall eyes. You hear me."

"You'll be sorry for that," snapped the blonde. "When you find out that these lousy Ffanx have been sending out a homing signal for their playmates—they're telepathic, you know—then you can apologize."

"On bended knee," said Glory. "Meanwhile, A-cup, do as you're told." She ran out.

"Come on. Orders is orders."

Garth watched them come. He took one step backward, then relaxed. He had shot

his bolt, and all he could do was to wait. The pudgy one picked him up gingerly, tried to carry him at arm's length, found he was too heavy, and hurried across the floor with him. She set him down gently on the table. One of the women hurried up with a small edition of the cage. Garth stepped in and a gate was sealed. A tube was fitted to it, and Garth heard air hissing in. He was grateful for the increased pressure, his skin had felt raw and distended for hours.

The pudgy one lifted the small cage bodily and set it on top of the larger glass cell in which Bronze lay. A lever was flipped, and Garth dropped ungracefully into the large one.

His first act was to run to Bronze and feel his pulse. It was weak but steady. Garth unbuckled his helmet and pulled it off, then knelt by Bronze.

"Bronze . . ."

No answer.

"Bronze!"

No answer.

"Bronze boy . . . look at all those women."

"Gug?" Bronze's eyes opened and he blinked owlishly.

Garth chuckled. "Bronze, you were after women. Look, man."

Bronze's gaze got as far as the glass wall, tested its shaky focus, and then penetrated outward. He sat bolt upright. "For me?"

Then he keeled over in a dead faint.

Garth sat and chafed his wrists, laughing weakly. Then, after a while, he went to sleep.

THE PUDGY ONE was relieved after a while. Butch waved away her own relief and stayed, elbows on the table, head low, glaring hatred and fear at the men. There was some sort of distant call. All the other women left. But the big blonde still stayed.

Garth had a dream in which he was chasing a girl in a brown cowl. She ran because she feared him, but he chased her because he knew he could show her there was nothing to fear. And as he gained on her, he heard Bronze's voice.

"Garth." It was very quiet. Intense, but

weak.

Garth sat up abruptly. Something hard and sharp whacked him in the forehead. There was a gout of blood. He fell back, dazed, then opened his eyes. He saw that Butch had maneuvered the point of the scalpel within a few inches of his forehead as he slept. He could see her looking at him, her face twisted in slow-motion convulsions of laughter. The all but inaudible boom of her voice was a tangible thing threatening the glass.

Garth turned to Bronze. He was lying on his back with one of the U-shaped clamps on his throat. It was pressing just tight enough to pin him down, just tight enough to keep his face scarlet. His breath rasped. "Garth," he whispered.

Garth staggered to his feet. Blood ran into his eyes. There was another deep hoot of laughter from outside. Garth wiped the blood away and staggered toward Bronze. The scalpel whistled down and across his path. He dodged, but lost his footing and fell.

There was a thunderous pounding on the table. Butch was apparently having herself a hell of a time.

Garth looked at the scalpel. It hung limply. He crawled toward Bronze. A tweezer-clamp shot out and caught his ankle. He pulled free of it, leaving four square inches of skin in its serrated jaws. He went on doggedly. He reached Bronze, put a foot on each side of the big man's neck, got a good grip on the U-clamp and pulled it upward. Bronze rolled free, his great lungs pumping. The flat of the scalpel hit Garth between the shoulder-blades and knocked him sprawling next to Bronze.

"How long have we been here?" asked Bronze painfully.

"Day—day and a half. On Earth, that's eight, nine months. Wonder what Viki's doing?"

He looked around, suddenly sat up. Butch was gone.

"Here come the rest of them. We'll know pretty soon."

They stood up and watched the slow, distance-eating march of the giants.

"They're carrying something . . . Will you look at those faces, Bronze!"

"They look wild."

"Glory . . . See her? The tall cool one."

"I see a tall one," said Bronze, deadpan. "She's putting something on the big table here. Hey, what is that thing?"

"Looks like a tombstone."

Garth said, "I've heard of making the prisoner dig his own grave, but this—"

The stone was put in the small box and aired. Big hands lifted it and set it on their roof.

"Get out from under."

The stone dropped, teteered. Garth leapt up and steadied it. It settled back on its base.

It was a rough monolith, about three feet tall, cut from soft, snow-white limestone. In it was a chamber with a glass door.

"Will you ever look at that," breathed Bronze.

Garth stared.

Cut into the base of the stone were the words,

THE GATEWAY OF GESELL

"I don't get it," said Garth.

Bronze said, "Look in the thing. The little door."

Garth peered, and saw a plastic scroll. He opened the door, took out the scroll and unrolled it. In exquisitely neat script it read:

This is your Gateway to all that is human;

to all that sweats, and cries, and tries;

to all hungers, to all puzzlement;

to mistakes compounded,

to mysteries cleared,

to growth, to strength, to complication

to ultimate simplicity.

Friends, be welcome,

others be warned.

Gesell is your gate

As he was mine.

A closed gate should never be guarded.

My gate is open, I guard it well.

Gesell knows I love him.

Please tell him I know it too.

Viki (Escaped)

There was a long quiet.

"Escaped," said Garth. "Escaped."

There was a thump over their heads. The airlock box had been placed there. There was a speaker baffle into it. It dropped. Bronze caught it, handed it to Garth.

Garth looked out through the wall and saw Glory, her calm face suffused, her eyes misty.

"Garth Gesell, you've read the scroll. I brought it because I didn't want you to wait; I didn't want you to just hear about it. She fixed your Gateway, Garth, and shoved the stone through so we'd find it. Then, when we were whooping and bawling properly, she let us find her.

"We couldn't have trusted any calculations, any statements. But we examined her and she's Escaped—oh, beyond question. That we could trust. For the one thing the Ffanx would never spend, not even to bait a trap for the biggest game, was a single drop of extradiol, which she carries unmolested. Viki's given us back a world, Garth, just by loving you . . .

"Are you ready to start on the calculations?"

Garth leaned against the wall near the speaker. Standing upright seemed to make his heart labor. "Not until I've seen Viki," he said.

There was a pause. Then Glory's voice again, "Bronze. Put on that helmet."

Unquestioningly, Bronze did. The airlock box thumped above them. Garth sat down and leaned against the wall. His

heart would not be quiet.

Bronze was suddenly beside him, helmeted. He clasped Garth's shoulder so hard it hurt, and as suddenly was gone. There was a slight scuffling sound. Garth turned. Bronze, in the lock, was lowering someone into the cage. Then the upper box was taken away.

She stood and looked at him gravely, unafraid. But this time there was a world of difference.

He put out his arms. One of them moved. Perhaps both. He pressed her cheek against his, and when he took it away, both were wet. So one of them wept. Perhaps both.

With her mathematical staff, Glory said, "He was quite right about the shift, you see. He and Viki and Bronze can go back through their own Gateway. But we'll have to open another. We go to a world where we will be only three times the size of the natives. There we build still another Gateway. And that will be Earth, and we'll be home."

"If it's as easy as that," asked the pudgy one, "Why did we have to be so cautious? Why didn't we go straight to that intermediate world and wait there?"

"Because," said Glory Gehman, "the intermediate world is the Ffanx planet. Do you see?"

Earth keeps a solemn festival at the meadows of Hack and Sack, through whose blue arch came first death, and then life.

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Too smart, too shrewd, this fugitive from the Galactic Patrol. Alganet paid off the war-bemused Ullans with cheap back-firing images. His one wise mistake was to purchase a Ullan Woman.

AL GANNETT HAD ALWAYS been smart. "I don't brag about it," he used to say modestly. "I can't take any credit for it. It just comes natural." Another of his maxims was: "Some people do everything the easy way. Not me. I sometimes take the hard way, just for practice."

It had been the hard way all right, when he went in for space piracy, to prey on the millionaires' ships instead of tramps nobody cared about—too hard, perhaps. Anyway, he left Sol's system in a tiny ship without his loot, without his mob, and with half the G. P. on his tail. Some people might have said he hadn't been so very smart. But Al thought philosophically as he shot across space to nowhere in particular: "Maybe I did bite off more than I could chew. But, boy, look at what I bit!"

Which, in a way, was smart. He could also console himself—and did—with the reflection that not everyone got a sendoff from half the Galactic Patrol. And being Al, he was planning even before he had slipped the great ships thundering in his wake.

He had very little to help him to plan. He was alone, his ship was stripped for speed, and he had nothing but a copy of the Green Book as a starting point. So he started from that.

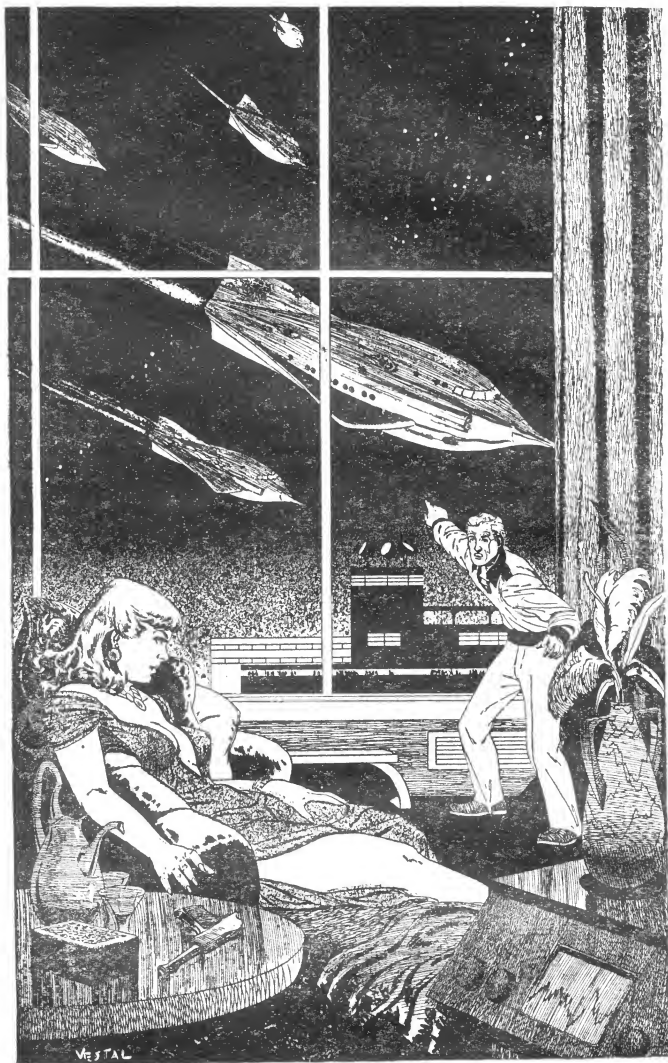
The Green Book is the guide to nowhere, where Al was going. A new edition comes out every year, and Al's was only three weeks off the presses. He had been buying it every year for a long while, always meaning to read it when he had the time. Now he had the time.

The Green Book contains not a word about anything in Sol's system, but everything that is known about all stars, dead and alive, all planets and all nebulae outside it. It is small as treatises go, because the operative word is 'known'. A possibility can't get into the Green Book. Even a probability hasn't much hope. Nothing less than reasonable certainty has more than the chance of a banana split at a children's party with the editors of the Green Book.

Without any sort of selection Al began to read. But he was used to finding what he was looking for, by the simple process of deciding he had been looking for what he found. And before he had finished reading the section on Ulla his plan was complete.

"Boy," he said to himself softly, "that'll show them."

Ulla was the second planet of the small star Morn, invisible from Earth and even from the new observatory on Mars. Morn was only some twenty light-years from Earth, but it was such a little star that its light gave up on the way. But Ulla, in



Then at last the fleet was back. But there were no lights . . .

compensation, was only some fourteen million miles from its sun, and was remarkably Earthlike. It was the same geological age as Earth to a day—as geological age went—had a mass equal to that of Venus, an atmosphere that was the twin of Earth's, and was populated by a humanoid race—possibly a human race.

There had been some communication with the Ullans, said the Green Book, but it had been discontinued because the Ullans had human intelligence, human belligerence, and might be dangerous. The Ullans' attitude had been, Al read, translating as he went for his own benefit, "Hands off, or we'll poke you in the belly. We're doing all right. Maybe we can lick you, maybe not. But we're ready to try. Make one wrong move and we'll come out swinging."

There was more of it, and when he had read it all Al summed up aloud. "They don't like us one little bit. There's nothing they'd like better than to lick the pants off the G. P. and the rest of the system. But they think just possibly we might lick the pants off them.

"Point two," he went on, "from the way this is written the G. P. isn't quite sure either. Earth takes anything it can get. But it's not sure it can take Ulla. So? So this is where Al Gannett comes in."

He pointed his ship towards Morn. The G. P., he observed, seemed to have given up the chase.

YES, ULLA LOOKED amazingly like Earth. There was more land surface, land teeming with Ullans, according to the Green Book. Al had written the estimated total population in the margin, complete with all the zeros: 7,000,000,000,000. It was impressive for a planet only four-fifths the size of Earth, and with some pretty big seas. That, he thought, could be a lot of cannon fodder. He dropped his ship lower and lower.

His reception was mixed. He landed near a huge grey city, and when he came out there were a lot of Ullans waiting for him. They didn't fall on his neck, but no one shot him. They were very careful, the Ullans.

They were also, he noticed with pleas-

ure, near enough human to make no difference to him. That is, the Ullan girls were contoured on a familiar but not uninteresting pattern. It would be the men he would have to work with, but he had always known there was more to life than work.

Illogically, like all races greeting a member of another, they were talking to him. He grinned, shaking his head. Then he tried to tell them he had a message for them, but would have to learn their language first. He didn't know whether that got across. But his second effort at communication did. At first they clearly thought they must have misunderstood him, but he hammered patiently at his point until they took it in. He was giving them his ship. It was theirs. They could destroy it, fly it, or take it apart, as the spirit moved them.

Their surprise at this gave him a chance to observe them more closely. They—the girls, of course; why should he look at the men?—were smaller than Earth girls, with other major measurements in proportion. Their skin was faintly yellow, exactly like pure Chinese, but there was nothing Oriental about their features. The cheekbones were Slav, the mouth French, the eyes Arabic. The hair was black and oily and rather unpleasant. But a few had lighter, really beautiful hair. Pick one, he told himself, very tall for her race (five feet three), blonde as Ullans went (rich chestnut), unusually plump (waist 24) and with big feet (a little over half the size of his), and she could walk down any Terran street and pass as an Earthling and a lovely one at that.

He knew he was safe. He had left the Green Book somewhere behind in space. For curiosity, if nothing else, they had to keep him safe at least until he knew their language. As a prisoner, perhaps; but that suited him. Back on Earth he would be a prisoner or worse.

It was a pity, he thought, about their clothes. A plain smock, even well-fitting and neat, even worn over nothing in particular, could never be very attractive. It wasn't even a dress—just a simple thing with plain round holes for arms and neck, falling as a short skirt to the knees.

He became aware that while a crowd almost hid the ship from sight, a man beside him was pointing to objects and giving them names. Hell, he thought, that was going too far. He wanted to learn the language, sure, but they might at least give him time to look around or sit down somewhere before they sent him to school.

It was time he did something to assert himself. The man was a foot shorter than Al. He pushed him gently but implacably aside and let his eyes rove around. Almost at once he found her—the girl who could walk down any street on Earth and have a lot of interest taken in the fact.

"Okay," he said. "If I must have a teacher, you're it. Start talking."

It took them a surprisingly short time to reach an understanding . . .

AS THE WEEKS went by Al marvelled at his luck. He almost decided not to go through with his plan, things were so good as they were. But when he thought how all the things that could have been wrong fitted so neatly into the plan formulated before he had even seen Ulla, it seemed to him that he was meant to go on with it.

One afternoon as he lay in the cool sunlight—it warmed, but didn't burn as Sol did, on Earth and Venus, at any rate—he realised it was time for the next step. He opened his mouth to speak to Vellin, the tutor he had chosen, then shut it again, looking at her with pride.

The Ullans had met him halfway. He was still a prisoner, but the fact was not constantly impressed on him. He had reasonable freedom and every comfort while he learned the language.

Vellin had met him more than halfway, but, to his great regret, not much. She was sitting there placidly, dressed in the outfit he had designed for her—the less said about that the better—but she was still his very official tutor, despite all the modifications he had tried to superimpose on the relationship. She smiled, she laughed, she treated him almost as a brother, she talked of what he wanted to hear, she taught when he was ready to be taught and relaxed when he wanted to relax. But . . .

She hadn't been a member of Ullan Se-

curity when he picked her out. She had been a mill worker—which was a hard life, and she was glad to have a rest from it. When he selected her as his tutor she had immediately been appointed an acting officer in Security—he knew all about that—and at once had an even harder life, spending most of the day with him and the rest being coached herself, so that she could instruct him. There was no secret about that either. She had to learn a lot more about the language than she had known, and more about Ullan customs, resources, psychology and a dozen other things. She didn't necessarily tell all this to Al—but she had to know it. She had to know not only what to tell him, but what not to tell him.

So altogether she exchanged a tough job for an even tougher one. But she seemed happy. For one thing it was a complete change from anything she had known. For another, she didn't work all the time when she was with Al. And one more factor: she experienced from him another thing she had never know before—unconcealed admiration. Among her own people she was just a girl—too tall, too fat, too half a dozen other things. Not ugly, just not pretty. But Al—well, Al had never pretended to be indifferent to women, nor pretended to them that he was.

"Vellin," said Al at last. She looked up with that gratifying attention of hers. "Vellin, I'm ready to talk now. I think I've got the hang of this language of yours. It's not hard, not if you're smart. I wasn't going to talk until I was sure I could make myself understood and understand everything that was said to me. But now I talk as well as you. Better maybe."

Vellin nodded, smiling. "You have a tongue that can break stones," she said. It was a compliment, in the unpoetic Ullan language.

"Well, bring on a few boulders," said Al. "The high-ups, mind. I don't want to talk to some tenth-rate Security officer."

"Security officers are never tenth-rate," said Vellin mildly. "I'm not tenth-rate myself now. I'm very important." She said it with the happy wonder of a child.

"So they must expect something from me," retorted Al. "And maybe they're right."

"I WANT Vellin there," said Al decidedly.

"Certainly," agreed Maber, the only officer apart from Vellin that Al had seen so far. "But not . . ." He glanced at her in distaste. A plain girl dressed like a peacock looks even more like a very plain girl. And to Maber, Vellin was only a little above hideousness.

"No, she's got a uniform," said Al. "So have I. Give us ten minutes."

And in ten minutes tutor and pupil met outside the conference room—the biggest room in Al's chalet. Al nodded, satisfied, and Vellin looked at him in open admiration.

Al was too smart to wear a gaudy, too splendid uniform. He and Vellin entered the room in plain grey tunics with silver buttons, razor-edged grey slacks, and shining black shoes. Only a subtle but quite sufficient modification of cut allowed for the difference in sex. In the uniforms he had designed he and Vellin were very impressive indeed, Al knew, even to Ullans. That was the idea. And he wasn't unaware of the advantage he gained by having Vellin in similar uniform to his. It was like gaining an ally.

There was a formal presentation ceremony. There seemed to be no rank in Security. Everyone was just an officer. There were Al and Vellin, Maber, and two men he had never seen before, Holn and Ader.

Al didn't waste any time. First he told them a little of what he had learned about them. They never, as a people, went back on their word. He could trust them, he said. (Al had never trusted anyone, but this was one time when he had no choice). So if they gave their word that he would be treated well, as one of them, he was ready to take it. That was all he wanted. He never meant to go back to Sol's system.

"You wish your gift of your spaceship," said Maber, "to pay for your acceptance among us."

"No," replied Al. "I can give you a lot more than the spaceship. And in return I want no more than I've already asked."

The others glanced quickly at Vellin, trying to read something from her expression. But she betrayed nothing, neither knowledge nor, in this case, ignorance.

"You're afraid of Earth," said Al softly. There was a stir. No one ever told an Ullan he was afraid of anything. "You're afraid," Al insisted, "and you're jealous. You'd attack if you knew enough, and thought you'd succeed. But you don't know enough, and you might not succeed. Well, I can tell you what you want to know. From me you can learn whether to attack or to leave Earth alone. And remember, whatever happens, I'm one of you. Whatever happens, I take it as an Ullan."

"You could have been sent," said Holn, "to make us attack."

"Why? The advantage is always with the attacker. If Earth wanted to fight, she'd attack. But she's scared as you are."

"But how can you help us, Al?" asked Vellin, giving away her ignorance. "You're no technician."

"I can answer that," said Maber. "Alganet already knows more of our science than you do, Vellin. Or can apply it better. From a man we can deduce the optimum level of technology of his race. Alganet is clever. He is an Earthman. From him we can discover the task that would be before us in an attack on Earth. We need only him and his spaceship."

HE LOOKED searchingly at Al. "Yes, you are very clever, Alganet. You knew we would do this anyway. So you offer it freely, and ask a small price. We agree, naturally. And the initiative is with you, not us."

"One thing I want to ask," said Holn. "Alganet, why are you betraying your system?"

"Betray' is a hard word," said Al easily. "Maybe I don't like Earth as it is. Maybe I like you. Maybe I think it would be better for both if you stepped in."

"That point of view is not inconceivable," Holn admitted.

"Then . . .?"

"I have answered you already," said Maber. "Taking you as the optimum Earthman . . ."

"I wouldn't do that," said Al modestly. "There's some pretty smart boys on Earth. I've run across one or two."

"Taking you as an intelligent Earthman then, as you must be, and your ship as a

recent product of your technology, we can find both your race's potentialities and the point it has reached. The technique has been highly developed. Of course we follow your plan, Alganet. You are ready to submit to the most rigorous mental and physical examination?"

"I've said so, haven't I?"

"No—merely implied it. But if you are, then in a year's time we should be ready for war. If we have a good chance of success, we'll take it."

"I knew you would. You're afraid of Earth, and afraid to leave her alone. So because you're afraid, you'll fight. I know Ullan psychology too, Maber."

IT WAS STRANGE that Vellin had to be compelled to marry Al. She had always liked and admired him—which to an Ullan meant she loved him. But perhaps Security didn't handle her right. They told her it was desirable to have all possible holds on Alganet, and that he had expressed his willingness to marry her. It was only necessary, in their view, to instruct her to marry him.

She didn't rebel because it was impossible for her to think of rebellion. She accepted the verdict that it was part of her job to marry Al.

But Al didn't want that—"No girl marries me because she has to," he told her bluntly. "If you don't like the idea, fine. I'll tell Security I've changed my mind."

Vellin gasped. "Don't do that," she begged. "They'll blame me. They'll think I—"

"They'll think what I tell them to think. Sure, maybe I'll have to leave them with a vague suspicion that you must have handled me the wrong way. But if you can only marry me as a duty, baby, I'm dealing myself out."

Vellin's only answer to the first real mental problem of her life was to burst into tears. Al looked at her thoughtfully. Try to comfort a weeping woman and you only make yourself look silly, he thought. Al had never made a habit of looking silly. It was one of the many things in which there was no percentage.

"Okay," he said, "mop up and stop making a noise. It only means I have to talk louder, and why should I waste my energy?"

I'll tell you what I'll do, Vellin. I'll give you time to make up your mind. I was always a patient guy. I'll tell Security I'm in no hurry to get married. Any time you change your mind, let me know. If you keep on thinking it's your duty to marry me, after a while I'll tell Security you're not my type."

Vellin had stopped crying, but there was still doubt in her face. "But it is a duty," she said. "I don't understand what you want. I"

"Look, baby," said Al dispassionately. "You've heard of a thing called love, haven't you? You Ullans don't talk about it as much as we do, but you still know about it. I've had women in love with me, and I didn't marry them. But one thing's sure—before I do marry any girl, she has to be in love with me. Believe me, if it ever happens to you, you'll know it."

He sighed. "I suppose I must be half in love with you myself," he admitted, "otherwise I wouldn't take so much trouble over you. You may be dumb, but I like you. And that's more than I ever said to any Earth girl."

When Vellin looked at him there was something in her eyes that showed him he wouldn't have to wait long before she knew what he was talking about.

THE DAY CAME when the ships began to take off, one every thirty seconds for thirty-five days. Ulla was a single minded, industrial planet. In a year it could have built ships for its entire population. Instead it built some hundred thousand great ships of war, not as fast as the G. P. ships Al described, but heavier and twice as deadly. As that vast navy took off and gathered in space, Al felt almost sorry for the civilization built round Earth.

It was a long wait, and there was nothing for anyone on Ulla to do but wait. Except Al, who had always been good at waiting and finding something useful to do. The end of a wait had often meant success, riches, luxury for a while. Even oftener it had meant getting smoothly on the run, so during any wait there was always the job of preparing for escape, just in case.

He didn't think it necessary to prepare

for leaving Ulla in a hurry. But it was so much a habit, and had served him so well, that he made his preparations as usual.

He was no longer a prisoner. The Ullans knew he had thrown in his lot with them, so they didn't have to guard him any more. The tests he had gone through were enough to convince them he was sincere.

His own ship was out of the question as a means of escape, but one of the first jobs the Ullans had done as an experiment had been duplicating it. One night Al went back to something he hadn't done for a long time—he did a job himself, and did it well. He hadn't lost his talent. He left a yard blazing, evidence of how the fire had started—a faulty fuse—and so much damage in a limited area that no one could ever discover that the wreckage of one of the small experimental ships was missing.

Yes, it was a good job. Al thought of it with satisfaction. He had never done a better job. He had his ship, no one knew it, and he hadn't even had to kill anyone.

The only problem had been what to do with his ship when he had it. But that had been fairly obvious. It had to be close at hand. So Al put it in a cellar and walled up the entrance. He would have to blow up the wall to get to it. But that wouldn't matter if he was making a getaway.

He reassured himself again. It wasn't likely. But it was smart to be ready for anything.

Then he went back to giving Vellin plenty of opportunity to appreciate his good qualities. So if the time had passed slowly for Ulla, it didn't hang heavily on Al's hands.

Then at last the fleet was back. Every one on Ulla saw it, everyone looked up—for the ships converged on their landing-grounds all over the planet at once. Everyone feverishly sought the lights of victory. Everyone tried to believe the ships were ablaze with light.

But there were no lights. It was defeat.

Al stared like the rest, Vellin at his side. He counted the ship automatically. Seventeen. There had only been eighteen from that field. One missing—only one. Seventeen of them might have been missing, and the one that was left might have returned blazing with the lights of victory.

Seventeen back—did it mean there had been no conflict at all? But then there would have been flashes, not seventeen dark, silent ships dropping to the field.

"Well," he said harshly, turning to Vellin, "whatever went wrong they'll blame it on me. I didn't tell them Earth had this or that. I misled them in saying so-and-so. My ship must have been centuries out of date. That's what they'll say.

"You were smart after all," he added. "You didn't link yourself to a failure—or someone your people will call a failure. Look what you saved yourself from. The wrath of a whole beaten planet that has to work it off on someone else."

Vellin said nothing, but the hurt in her eyes made Al wish he hadn't been so bitter.

PRIDE OR CAPRICE made Al receive them in his uniform. He had never been in any army; but somehow he had more control over himself in that neat, sober costume that made him look as if he were somebody.

The obvious thing for him to do, of course, was to make his escape while he could. But Al was curious. He couldn't leave without discovering exactly what had happened.

Besides, he was in no hurry to decide all was lost. It was still possible that a bold stroke—a typical Al Gannett manoeuvre—would save for him all he seemed to have lost.

Vellin wore her uniform too. Al didn't know quite how to take that. Was she facing both ways? Then he saw it, and a glow of confidence ran through him. She was backing him. Her world had been beaten, but not Alganet. He would never be beaten.

Lightly, just before Mabers arrived, he kissed her. She stepped back quickly, surprised. Ullan love-making was torrid, with nothing of tenderness in it. She had never encountered gentleness—and probably never expected it from Al.

Mabers came with two officers unknown to Al. That was good, Al thought—a ceremonial approach. A high official like Mabers wouldn't come to drag him away personally.

"Holn and Ader are dead," said Mabers coldly. "You are responsible for their

deaths."

"I thought that would be the line," retorted Al with equal coolness. "It's all my fault, is that it?"

Maber stared at him levelly. "We're not vindictive, Alganet," he said. "And you were sincere. We still know that. But thousands of our men have died—"

"And you need a scapegoat. That's nothing new. But first—what happened?"

"A patrol met us. Twenty ships. Twenty ships against a hundred thousand. We used our vibration ray. Nothing happened. They must have some insulation that damps it out. Or a screen that stops it. We tried our energy beam. They sucked it in. They took all we could give them and swung in front of the ships that had sent out no beam, as if asking for more. We tried missiles. Their radio brushed our control aside and they sent the missiles back. Some ships were destroyed then by their own shells. We tried unguided missiles. They curved slightly and shot past the Earth ships."

"But why go on? They made us show them every trick we had. They were brave men in those ships. They must have met us expecting to be blasted to nothing. Probably they only hoped to delay us until a larger force arrived. Then they found they could handle us without help—one ship to five thousand of ours. They kept inviting us to produce our strongest weapon, whatever we'd kept in reserve."

"We had nothing in reserve," Maber went on heavily. "We were weaponless. We might as well have left our vibration ray and energy beam and rockets and everything else back here. They were cautious at the start. But soon they saw we represented no problem."

"Then we tried to pass them. We thought we might accomplish something by sheer numbers. We drove on towards Earth."

"When they saw what we were doing, they began to pick off our leaders. Holm and Ader were in one of the first ships to be destroyed. The Earth ships used a beam concentrated to the thickness of a finger. I don't know whether it was a heat ray or not. But it could hardly touch a ship without destroying it. Imagine a hole driven right through a ship, through every-

thing in its path. But usually they swung their ray and it cut ships in half. Sometimes two or three at a time. Still we drove on, with the twenty Earth ships darting about among us."

"Soon we saw that not a single ship could ever reach Earth. At the rate we were being eliminated, the whole fleet would have been gone long before we got within striking distance of the inner planets."

"And it wouldn't have made any difference," said Al, "for they're fortified more strongly than the whole fleet, let alone twenty ships."

"When we turned, they left us alone," said Maber bitterly. "They lost interest. We were only a toy fleet."

THEY STOOD in silence for a moment. It might have been a remembrance ceremony for the dead dreams of conquest formulated at previous meetings.

"They'll be here soon," said Al. "They won't destroy Ulla. They'll be civil and polite, but they'll still be conquerors. There will be trade, and Ulla will benefit—but on Earth's terms."

"But you," said Maber softly, "won't be here to see it."

Al laughed. He didn't feel as brave as he looked. No one could be. He was in a tight spot, and perhaps he should have escaped while he could. But to where?

"Threats, Maber?" he taunted. "I've heard threats before, in a dozen languages, on a score of worlds. But I'm still here."

"And alive," Maber admitted, "for the moment."

They saw no movement. One moment Al was smiling coolly at them, the next he was holding a blaster that covered them all.

"I admit this is a poor argument," he said, "but it lends force to what I have to say."

"You're mad," Maber told him. "What do you think you can accomplish, on a world where everyone is against you?"

Vellin was behind Al. Tensed, he could hear her excited breathing and moved gradually so that he could cover her also.

But he paid too much attention to Vellin, who didn't matter, and Maber, who

was merely trying to hold it. He whirled as he saw a movement out of the corner of his eye. One of the officers had drawn a blaster, not the ceremonial gun at his belt, but another weapon from his shoulder. And as he flicked his own blaster round Al knew he was too late.

There was a faint hiss, and the officer was staring at the stump of an arm. Blaster and hand had disappeared in a flash of blue flame.

It was safe for Al to turn his head. Vellin, her blaster still levelled, was white but determined.

"Thanks, Vellin," he said. "You're with me, after all?"

Vellin, tensed and resolute, didn't answer. But it was an unnecessary question.

"Two traitors," said Maber harshly. "A traitor to Earth and a traitor to Ulla. You make a perfect pair. What now, traitors? Do you think you can escape?"

"Tie that man's hand before he bleeds to death, Vellin," said Al. "He may be needed yet."

HE TURNED BACK to Maber and grinned crookedly. He was beginning to sense something he didn't like. But he had never been afraid to face facts. It wasn't smart to deny things which were obviously true.

"I don't think you told me the whole story, Maber," he said. "Why blame me? What did I do wrong?"

Maber smiled too, and there was no more warmth in his smile than in Al's.

"According to the picture we had of Earth, nothing like this could have happened," he said. "They were a race on our level, we thought, with a certain superiority in technique and experience which could be overcome by numbers and surprise. That was the picture our scientists built up from their study of you and your ship.

"But," he went on slowly, "there was one wrong inference. Your ship was all right. But you—we thought you were clever. You thought yourself clever, and you seemed so to us. But, Alganet, we were both wrong. Our defeat shows plainly that you must be a very ordinary Earthman. Perhaps even stupid. It was in believing in your high relative intelligence

that we made our mistake. If we had had only two Earthmen for purposes of psychological comparison, we could have found the probable variation in level of intelligence, and realized we hadn't a chance."

Al felt a wild urge to shout and rave that Maber was wrong and that he was smart and had always been smart. That Maber was covering up for the Ullan scientists' mistakes. That they had simply failed to realize how smart he was.

Instead he said evenly: "That's not my affair. You said we couldn't escape, Maber. You were wrong. I was smart enough to plan even for this. We could escape right now—but we won't. You need me, Maber. You may not like it, but that doesn't alter the fact. Stupid, am I? I'll show you just how stupid I can be."

He put away his blaster. It was merely a gesture. He could have it out again before Maber could move. But it was a good gesture. He said over his shoulder:

"Vellin. Put away your gun."

She hesitated in disbelief. Then as she saw that Al meant it, she slowly pushed the blaster back in her belt.

"Go on, Maber," Al invited. "Two traitors. What was it you were going to do?"

"You said, . . .," Maber stumbled on the words. "You said we needed you."

"You'll always need me, Maber," said Al. "I may not be smart on Earth, but I'm smart here. Maybe some day I'll have to move out—when some bigger operator moves in. But meanwhile, Maber, you need me to meet the envoys from Earth and talk to them—and that's only the beginning. I'll get better terms than you would. They won't like me—they chased me out. You don't like me either. But you'll both need me as a go-between for a while."

"Earth will demand you as a criminal," Maber retorted. "Besides, we're conquered. They won't treat with us, they'll tell us what they want."

Al shook his head slowly. "You don't understand economics. There are over 7,000,000,000,000 Ullans, and this is an industrial planet. Earth can't rule Ulla. You forget that. It would need too much power and too many men to keep Ulla subjected. Can't you see that?"

He grinned as Maber brightened. "But Earth will have to keep that vast potential in check," Al went on, "and the only way is trade. We'll be rich, Maber. Have you no imagination?"

He made a derisive gesture. "As for Earth demanding me as a criminal, they'll think twice about that when I have seven million million Ullans behind me. And I will have, Maber, won't I?"

It was Al's greatest coup. He had said just enough—enough to show the brighter possibilities and conceal the difficulties. But difficulties, Al thought contentedly—I thrive on them. Vellin was a difficulty, and she came round in the end.

She had made up her mind now. One

glance at her showed she thought there was no one in the galaxy like Al. And Al wasn't the one to deny it.

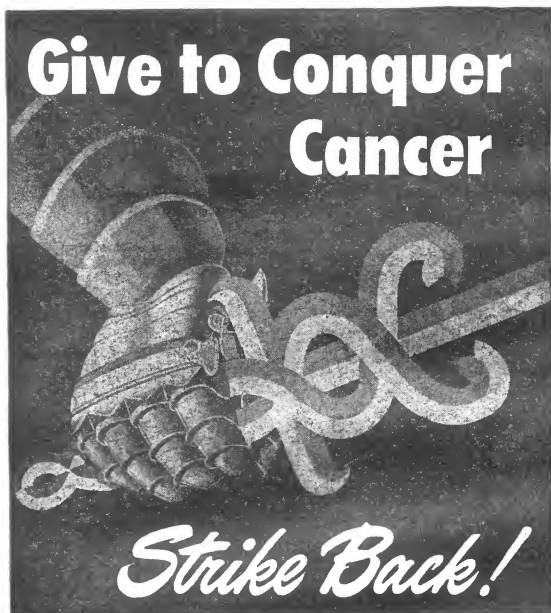
"It's only a respite," said Maber. "It can't last."

Al grinned, and this time there was a whole world of amusement in his smile.

"My whole life has been made up of respites," he said. "I'm always sitting on top of a volcano, Maber. I like it. There's no fun in doing things the easy way."

"But maybe this time I'll try to make it last." He put his arm about Vellin's waist. "I never tried it before. But now I've got responsibilities.

"It's a new feeling," he added thoughtfully.



AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY

Why was it, Gongo wondered, that the Earthman lay asleep in his space-freighter bunk and whispered in many voices?



It was a mistake for Norton to have gone back to sleep . . .

the inhabited MEN

NORTON WAS THE ONLY ONE of the three on the *Ara* who was superstitious, and even he didn't attempt serious argument against landing on the planetoid. Making repairs on the *Ara* was absolutely necessary; the repairs couldn't be made in space; and he couldn't even remember who had told him that the planetoid was unlucky. So they landed.

by

**MARGARET
ST. CLAIR**

The repairs went briskly. The crew worked for eighteen hours out of the day, and ate on the job. Inside of a week the *Ara* was lifting her tired old shoulders up from the surface of the planetoid. She got to a frequented portion of the spaceways before she broke down completely. It was as much as her crew had dared hope for. They were picked up by a passing freighter which claimed the *Ara* as salvage, and six months later they were landed, gaunt and angry and soiled, at Port Pendraith. None of the three, Evans or Norton or Miller, was ever to realize that on the planetoid he had been colonized.

In Pendraith, they discussed their situation. They wanted to stay together, if it was possible. They tried to lease another ship, and couldn't raise the deposit money. They asked acquaintances and friends for grubstakes, and were rejected. Finally they saw that if they weren't to starve in Pendraith, they'd have to separate. And from then on different things happened to them. But they ended up exactly the same.

NORTON was the superstitious one. He was short, dark, thickset, and inclined to be irascible. He shipped out of Pendraith on a freighter which was almost as foul and ill-found as the one which had landed him there in the first place. On the ship he was assigned to the steward's department, as waiter and galley boy.

The cook, Gongo, was a native of Pendraith. He had been kicked about, with various degrees of brutality, ever since his fifth birthday, and by now he could fawn or cringe or snarl with equal facility. In his way, he was a religious man.

Gongo and Norton bunked together in a room so small that if one of them stood up in it, the other had to stretch out full length in his berth. The one desirable thing in the room was the airduct which, instead of being in the ceiling as was customary, had been located in the wall just over the upper berth. Fresh air can be a considerable luxury. Gongo slept in the upper berth.

On the second day out from Pendraith, Norton took Gongo's things out of the upper berth and put his own in. Naturally, he moved the bedding at the same time. Under Gongo's pillow he found a small

cloth bag.

He opened it. It held a vaguely man-shaped piece of hard root, a wad of lint mixed with hair, and some crystals of what looked like rock salt.

Norton held the bag by the strings, thinking. A less superstitious man would have laughed and put the bag back under the pillow of Gongo's new bunk. But Norton was a little afraid of the thing. After a minute he took it out in the corridor and threw it in the reducer. It flared up briefly and then went to join the freighter's auxiliary fuel supply.

Gongo discovered the change of bunks that night. He was not much surprised. He had been rather expecting it, since Norton was bigger and heavier than he. But when he felt under the pillow of his new bunk and couldn't find his bag, he turned quite white. He said, "What did you do with my bag?"

"Threw it out, sticky." The last word was a nickname much resented by the natives of Pendraith. Norton was lying in the upper bunk. His hand was resting on the blaster he wasn't supposed to have, and did have. "Want to make something out of it?"

There was a silence. Then Gongo said, "I guess not."

In the third week, when the two men were in the galley, Gongo said, "What's the matter, you don't eat? You think I poison the food?" There was hopeful malice in his voice.

"Naw," Norton replied judiciously, "you wouldn't have the nerve." He spat into the sink. "Your chow's not so hot, that's all. It don't appeal to my appetite."

That night Norton talked in his sleep. The voice was thin and small, to come from his chunky body. Gongo would not have heard it at all if he had not been lying awake thinking of his lost god.

After a second he slipped out of his bunk and stood with his head leaned toward Norton in the dark. "Thya," came a thread, a wisp of sound, "do you hear me?"

"Why not?"

"And I."

"And I."

"Isn't it wonderful," came the first fila-

ment, "to live, be free, grow, expand?"

"I warn you—Thya, Pohm, Rya, all the rest—you grow too far. It is dangerous. You grow too far." The wisp of sound managed to be harsh.

"How can we help it? It is difficult to refuse to grow."

"You must try. No excuses. It must be done."

The half-dozen filaments of sound swelled into a tiny clamor in the dark. Gongo sucked in his breath. He was thinking of folk-lore. He found the switch and turned on the light.

Norton sat up in his bunk, instantly angry. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"You were talking in your sleep."

"Oh," Norton yawned and rubbed his hand over his face. "Did I say anything?" he asked.

"You. . . were talking about growing. There were more voices than one in your throat."

"Yeah? You must of imagined it. Stow it, sticky, and turn out the light. I got to have my sleep."

He rolled over as Gongo obeyed. Gongo sat down on the edge of his berth. He was badly frightened.

He sat there in the dark, thinking about what had happened to his divinity and the various disguises the devil can assume, until Norton's breathing grew regular. When he was sure that Norton was asleep again, he got one of his kitchen knives out from under his mattress. He opened Norton with it from pubic bone to diaphragm. It was a mistake for Norton to have gone back to sleep.

EVANS was the second of the crew of the *Ara*. He was a big, slow-moving man, with a friendly smile and a mind which also moved rather slowly. Since he spoke politely and was presentable, he got a berth on a luxury liner as a steward.

The name of the liner was the *Bootic*. It was a new ship, equipped with the latest devices, and it carried four stewardesses to cater to the needs of women passengers. Since Evans was friendly, obliging, and not offensively on the make, he soon got to be a favorite with the stewardesses.

One of them, a small, dark girl named Helen Dawes, he more than liked. She teased him a good deal, since he was easy to tease, but he thought she liked him too. He began to wonder what the attitude of the *Bootic's* owners would be toward letting a married couple work out on the same ship, and how much the down payment on a semi-house in Port Pendraith would be.

The fuel tanks of the *Bootic* exploded when the ship was entering the asteroid belt. For a moment there was a flare almost as bright as a nova, and then the safety devices went to work. The result was that though everybody aft of partition number one was killed almost instantly, those forward of it had about two minutes to don suits and get out through the emergency hatch.

Evans and Helen and a middle-aged woman named Edna Kinch were on the right side. The emergency hatch, though it was red-hot, worked. When the three of them were about half a kilo away they turned and saw the *Bootic*, with the curious transparent look burning objects have, eaten with fire from stem to stern. Then they jettied their way to the nearest asteroid and sat down to wait.

For the first hour or so they talked about rescue. The *Bootic*, after all, had been in a main-travelled spaceway. Though the explosion had given her no time to send out an S.O.S., the force of the explosion—(What had caused it? Evans said he thought some tiny irregularity must have developed in the lining of the fuel tanks since they had had their last microscopic inspection. The Board of Inquiry, months later, was to echo his opinion.)—the force of the explosion would certainly have registered on the instrument panel of any ship in the vicinity.

That meant that ships would soon be jetting up to look for survivors. And, though the asteroid the three had landed on was only about a third of a kilo through, and their suit radios couldn't project a signal for more than a kilo and a half, it was reasonable to assume they'd be found. Oh, yes. But as time passed and the three began to realize the odds against them, they fell silent.

They had oxygen for about twelve hours. The joker in their theories about rescue, of course, was that ships in space are usually separated by the kind of distance known as astronomical. It was almost impossible that any ship had been near enough to the *Bootic* to have the explosion register. When the time came at which the *Bootic* ought to have reached another signal point in her course, and no signal was sent, she would be missed. A search ship would be sent out then, no doubt about it. But that would take almost six days. The survivors had oxygen for twelve hours.

Edna Kinch had hurt her leg rather badly getting through the escape hatch. There were analgesics in her suit, and she took doses of them, but even when she was nearly unconscious she kept moaning. Since the other two couldn't help her, they walked—floated, rather—a little away from her and sat down. They looked out at the stars.

The constellations were not much changed from their familiar shapes on earth. The swan was overhead, eternally flying between Altair and Vega, and Antares burned redly in the forepart of the scorpion. If Evans and his girl wanted to see Achenar, all they had to do was to walk around the asteroid.

Helen said, "Vega's a beautiful star. . . . I can't realize that we're going to die."

EVANS wanted to kiss her so much that he felt like crying. He didn't dare open his helmet, of course. He put his arm around her, and they sat with their gloved fingers interlaced. He told her how he felt about her, and about the semi-house in Port Pendraith.

She said, "One of those semi-houses with the round living room. Yes. I wish I could kiss you, Bill. . . . I wish. . . ."

He said, "I'm going to give you my oxygen tank."

She cried out at that. "You can't be so cruel! No, please, no. I love you, Bill. Are you going to make me watch you die?"

So he gave up that idea. He put his arm around her again and they sat there, talking from time to time, and seeing the gauges on their oxy-tanks move from

three-quarters to half to one quarter and on down. When the needles pointed to one eighth, Helen said, "We've got analgesics, Bill. Let's take them. That way, we won't ever know."

He nodded. Together, smiling at each other in the starlight, they sipped at their stirrup cups. The stars seemed to swell and billow, and then a fog fell over them. It got dark.

Evans roused at last. He was confused, and then surprised, and then he looked around for Helen. Had there been a miracle?

She had fallen over on her side. Her face was dark and congested, and when he saw her he was glad he hadn't let himself hope. He went back to Edna Kinch, and found that she was dead too. Both Helen's tank and hers were quite empty. So was his. But he was still alive.

Evans couldn't understand it. He thought for a while, and then he took off his helmet. No rush of air left his suit; it was empty. He wasn't breathing. But he was still alive.

He sat there for about half an hour, between the bodies of the two women, trying to understand it. He couldn't make any sense out of it. Finally he unhooked his blaster from its holster. The gauge read full charge. So he blew his head off.

MILLER had the hardest time of the three getting a job. He hung around employment agencies until the clerks frowned when they saw his lean, angry face coming in the door. He borrowed money from acquaintances as long as they would loan him any, and then he tried panhandling. He grew desperate. He didn't take to drinking—that was not one of his vices—but if he had not pawned his blaster early in his difficulties, he would certainly have tried a stick-up job with it. He had almost reached the point of no return which separates the merely unemployed from the unemployable, when Quilk, the proprietor of the *Royal Glory*, hired him.

The *Royal Glory* was a "louse house", a fifth-rate stereo theatre which specialized in pornographic tactifilms and historical epics slanted to appeal to Pendraithian patriotism. Whether the undernourished

derelicts who composed the *Royal Glory's* audiences were capable of responding to either of these classes of stimuli is doubtful, but Quilk took his programs seriously. He thought of himself as a patron of the arts, and he wanted to attract "A better class of personages" than the *Royal Glory* had been getting. He laid down, as a house rule, that nobody was to sit through the same program more than three times. And he hired Miller, as ticket-taker and bouncer, to enforce this.

Miller did not dislike his new work. His air of repressed anger made him an efficient bouncer, and he was amused by Quilk. As he grew more familiar with the *Royal Glory's* routine, he had leisure moments, and he took to spending these in a tiny paved court at the back of the theatre where Quilk also took the air.

Quilk was a health faddist. He would sit on a bench in the patch of sunlight in the little court, sipping a health drink or occasionally getting up to take an exercise, and discourse to Miller about the benefits of the latest health diet he was following. He tried a new one every week or so. Miller, sprawled on the pavement, would listen in indolent, half-scornful amusement, as pleased with the sunlight as a vegetable.

Time passed, Miller though Quilk was paying him poorly, was saving money. Quilk let him sleep in the ticket office—he took the box-office receipts home with him at night, of course—and Miller's expenditure for food was almost nothing. It was not that he was starving himself—in fact, he was gaining weight. But food did not much interest him. He began to think dreamily of buying a new spaceman's outfit and going back to the employment agencies. Presentable and prosperous-looking, he was sure he could ship out into space again. Then the green plague broke out in Port Pendriath.

Quilk was terrified. He talked of closing up the *Royal Glory*, and for a day Miller's future hung in the balance. Then the two strongest traits in Quilk's personality reasserted themselves.

"The show must go on," he said solemnly to his employee. "In a time of crisis such as this, personages have a particular need

for the solace of art. The show must go on! Don't you agree, Miller?"

"Sure," Miller answered. Quilk, as always, amused him. He was trying to smile.

"And beside, I am in no danger," Quilk continued, a little hastily. "Personally, I mean. It is not as if I were an ignorant, undernourished Pendraithian, with no awareness of the basic laws of health. With my new diet. . . . Yes, the show must go on!"

"You bet!" Miller agreed. This time, he did smile. Quilk looked at him a little suspiciously.

"Of course, we will take elementary prophylactic measures. You can wear my blaster. When you take the tickets, Miller, I want you to look in their mouths."

"H'um?" Miller said.

"Yes, in their mouths. It is well known that the first signs of the plague appear there. If there are spots, they are not to enter. Perhaps in their ears also. I have heard that sometimes it appears in the ears."

Quilk was shivering. Miller, though he never could take him seriously, was sorry for him. "O.K. I'll look in their mouths and ears."

MILLER made his inspections conscientiously. He turned away two or three of the infected daily. He was not at all afraid of the plague himself, though terrestrials did contract it, for he had never felt more fit in his life.

Surprisingly, business at the *Royal Glory* was good. Perhaps Quilk had been right, and personages at a time of crisis did need the solace of art. Quilk, counting his receipts at night and shivering, could congratulate himself.

The port health authorities, meantime, were not idle. Disease is no respecter of status. What begins in the slums of a city may end by menacing government hill. They laid down a *cordon sanitaire* around the infected areas. For a while, as the plague grew more severe, the cordon tightened. Then it began to relax. In the fourth week the city was officially declared free of plague.

"We came through that rather nicely, I think," Quilk said. It was after theatre

hours, and he was putting the night's take in a metal mesh satchel. "Tomorrow I will get out some new posters—" The only Vid House that stayed open all during the plague! The *Royal Glory* is first, as always—first in service, first in programs, first in artistic pleasure for you!" He nodded. He picked up his blaster from the desk and strapped it around his waist.

"Sounds good," Miller said, in lazy agreement. He yawned and stretched. The light fell full in his open mouth.

Quilk looked at him. His jaw dropped. Miller saw, without understanding it, that he had turned pale. Quilk said, in a wobbling voice, "It isn't possible. They said there were no new cases." He began to back away, one hand on his blaster, the other on the metal valise.

"What are you talking about?" Miller asked irritably.

"Your throat. There are plague spots, the green plague spots, in your throat."

"No, there aren't. You're crazy. I'm not sick."

"I saw the spots myself," Quilk answered. He was trembling all over. "Keep away from me. After all my precautions! Get out!"

Miller couldn't understand the situation. After a minute he asked, "You mean I'm fired?"

"If you like. Anything. Only get out."

"You owe me four days' wages."

"Take it, then." Quilk opened the valise, took out a handful of coins, and threw it at him. "Get out."

Miller turned an angry red. "Don't talk to me like that, sticky. What in hell is the matter with you?" He advanced a step.

Quilk drew the blaster. "Don't come near me! I'm warning you!"

"I tell you, I haven't got the plague," Miller answered. He was trying to be reasonable. "You're too excitable." Once more Quilk saw the plague spots in his throat.

"Stay away! Stay away!" The blaster described a wobbling circle in Quilk's hand.

Miller bit his lip. Even at this moment the contemptuous amusement Quilk inspired in him kept him from taking the Pendraithian seriously. He picked up the coins from the floor and counted them. "You're a day and a half short, sticky," he said, looking at Quilk. "Pay me." He walked toward him, holding out his hand.

"No! Don't! I—" Quilk shuddered. He couldn't get any farther away from Miller because he was already against the wall of the box-office. He moaned. Then he closed his eyes and fired.

It was all a mistake, of course. Miller never did have the plague. But he was just as dead, after Quilk blasted him, as if he had.

THE ORGANISMS that had colonized the crew of the *Ara* died with them, naturally. They were able to survive for considerably longer than the men, but the knife wound and the blaster charges disrupted their nicely-balanced economy beyond repair.

What they had done, as they grew on the men's mucous membranes and in their body cavities, was to convert Norton and Evans and Miller into Wardian cases, terrariums—units in which chlorophyll and radiant energy (it did not have to be sunlight) cooperated to turn the carbon dioxide of katabolism into oxygen, complex starches, and growth. After the economy was well established, its hosts, had they known it, were potentially immortal. They could have gone for years without needing to eat or breathe. But the plants in a Wardian case die when the case is broken. And the tenants of Norton and Evans and Miller, for all their complex mental organization, were basically plants.

They were not in the least resigned to dying, however. For hours they fought against it, screaming to each other, imploring, cursing, praying not to die. In the end, Evans and Miller and Norton had this in common, that each of them kept on talking for a long time after he was dead.

Sardonic, wasn't it, that when the Plague swept the universe, when the fate of entire star-colonies hung on that blacked-out serum-station on Tarn II, the only man within jetting distance was an ineffectual little geologist named Whaley . . .



"Halt!" he said again, foolishly, for of course it meant nothing to the Tarnians.

THE STAR-FOOL

by GORDON DICKSON

NO ONE KNOWS WHO FIRST pinned that unkind name upon the wandering scholars of the galaxy but it is not hard to guess from what class of men he came. Undoubtedly he was some one of the pioneering element, miner, merchant, middleman, or any of the other various groups that tore into the endless planetary frontier during the twenty-eighth century. To these men, exploitation, pure and simple, was the only worthwhile oc-

cupation. They looked with contemptuous scorn on the geologists, archeologists, paleontologists, all those whose aim was the acquisition of pure knowledge.

Consequently, there was a certain amount of ironic humor in a situation that arose on Krynor IV near the close of the twenty-eighth century. It began when an epidemic of nerve-disease broke out among the pioneering element there. It grew when the officials of the Federation Government

tried to get in touch with their medical station on Tarn II, where the remedy for that particularly virulent plague was cultured in a serum made from native blood. They were answered by the ravings of a madman. And it reached its peak of humorous irony when those same officials discovered that the only human within reasonable distance of the station was a star-fool, an insignificant little geologist by the name of Peter Whaley . . .

IT IS NOT TRUE that every man must have some kind of companion if he is going to wander the depths of space. There are some few self-sufficient individuals who find the company of their work quite sufficient, and, in fact, prefer it to the society of their own kind. Peter Whaley was one of these. A young man with an addiction to sloppy, comfortable clothes and a distaste for combing his hair, he had not the slightest objection to company—when he was not busy. When he was busy, the existence of the rest of the human race was superfluous.

At the present moment, on the airless moon of Tarn II, he was busy.

"George," he said, gazing into the large scanner set into one wall of his control-room, "bring me a specimen from that large black boulder to your right."

Fifty miles away, a small robot chirped an acknowledgment of the order, rolled, hopped and jumped to the boulder in question, and excised a small chunk of it. Having done so, it tucked the specimen into a place in its body and chirped again to signify that the specimen was secured.

"Very good, George," said Peter Whaley, approvingly. "Now bring all the specimens you've got back to the ship."

The little robot chirped and began to roll. Peter turned away from the screen. No need to watch further. George was the last word in specimen-collectors, and could be relied on to return safely over any kind of terrain.

He was laying out his apparatus for chemical analysis, when the deep-space communicator buzzed. With a puzzled frown, he laid down the test-tube he was holding and walked over to the communicator screen, switched it on.

There was a second of blurring motion as the tubes warmed; then the features of Rad Dowell, Commissioner, Thirty-Ninth Galactic Sector, spring into sharp relief on the screen. To Peter, who had seen them twice before during news space-casts, they were only vaguely familiar, as the face of someone known a long time ago.

"Whaley, geologist, speaking," said Peter, automatically. There was a long pause as his voice and image crossed lightyears of distance, to Thirty-Ninth Headquarters on Tynan V. Then the image in the ships' screen spoke again.

"Rad Dowell, Sector Commissioner, calling," said the grey-haired man in the dark blue uniform of a Federation official. "Are you at present on the moon of Tarn II?"

"I am," answered Peter. "There is a black basalt here which, in my opinion, is decidedly unusual for a moon of this type. Not only its prevalence, but its peculiar structure reflect a kind of igneous action in the local strata—" He broke off noticing a look of exasperation on the Commissioner's lined face. "I beg your pardon," he said. "What did you call me about?"

THE COMMISSIONER sighed. The words star-fool were so obviously passing through his mind that they might as well have been printed on the screen. This, then, was the only man available to handle a crisis that meant life or death to literally millions.

"Whaley," said the Commissioner, heavily, "do you know what nerve disease is?"

"No, I don't," answered Peter, truthfully.

"It's a virus infection that strikes humans whose natural resistance has been lowered by exposure to cosmic radiation," explained the older man. "If we catch it in time, we can cure it—with the proper serum. The only difficulty is that it has a three-month incubation period and can only be detected during the last two or three weeks of that period. Since it is highly infectious, that means that by the time an epidemic breaks into the open, it has usually spread over half a dozen or more planets and thousands of people are already infected. That means that when an epidemic

does break out, we have to rush serum immediately to all possible danger points and start general inoculations. Whaley, we have an epidemic on our hands right now—and that planet below you is the galaxy's only source of serum!"

And, swiftly, the Commissioner outlined the situation to Peter Whaley.

"You are not government personnel," he wound up. "You have absolutely no training in handling alien races and the situation down there is probably dangerous as hell. I can't order you to go, and I don't know what you can do if you do go. All I can do is ask—will you?"

It was quite a question.

Peter Whaley, geologist, looked at his chemical apparatus spread out on the workbench, and thought of the little robot skittering back over the moon's airless surface even now. That was his work, not this. What could he do, if he went, seeing that he was without training and without experience? Barring a minor miracle he would probably do no more than make a ridiculous mess of things and die a stupid death. And the Lord only knew what he would find down there.

But, when he opened his mouth to refuse, a sudden irrational pride mixed with anger came swelling up in his throat like a bubble to choke off his words. Wasn't he, after all, as good as the next man, as good as these hard-headed empire builders? Abruptly a tingling urge for adventure ran hotly through his veins, and he threw logic and common sense together to the winds.

"Of course, Commissioner," he said. "I'll leave right away."

Surprise and hope mixed themselves for a moment in the expression on Rad Dowell's face.

"Good man!" he answered. "There's a ship on the way from here to pick up the serum. See if you can have a load ready for them when they get there. Every day's delay means several thousand lives. And—good luck."

"Thanks," said Peter, feeling suddenly embarrassed, and cut the connection.

For a moment he stood, bemused, until an insistent chirping brought him from his trance and set him to opening the air-

lock. The little robot had hit a stretch of smooth rock and made good time on the way back. Peter closed the outer lock, opened the inner, and the squat mechanical rolled in, blinking its red top light furiously in warning that it was still too cold from exposure to airless space to be safely touched.

"It's all right, George," said Peter, wryly. "We won't be getting to work on those samples for quite some time. Just dump them into the storage bin and get ready for takeoff."

George turned and wheeled off in the direction of the storage bin, and Peter settled himself at the controls. Actually, although it was not really necessary with the almost automatic ship he drove, Peter was a better than average pilot and he procrastinated a little, checking various dials and indicators until there was no longer any real excuse for delaying the takeoff. When there was no more reason for delay, he sighed once, cleared his tubes with a short blast, and took off.

FROM ABOVE, the station looked like a small colony of ant-hills. Only the metallic sheen of the domed huts and the signal tower denied the impression. There was no answer to Peter's beamed announcement of landing; and neither human nor alien stirred in the clearing. He cut his power and dropped to the baked clay of the landing spot.

Still, nothing moved. Peter sat at the silent controls and wondered. The first emergency call from Sector Headquarters, they said, had been answered by a blank screen from which came senseless ravings in a voice which could no longer be identified as one of the station members. Since then, the station had not answered at all. The question was: was the madman still alive and waiting for Peter, someplace out there?

Peter rubbed his nose, thoughtfully. Inside him, a cold little voice was regretting his hasty acceptance of the Commissioner's request. What are you doing here? the voice was asking. This is not your line of business. Leave adventure for the men who are trained for it. At the same time, however, an innate stubbornness rose up to

combat his uneasiness. Peter had the dogged persistence characteristic of his kind, and he had never yet abandoned, unfinished, a job to which he had committed himself. Madman or not, it was necessary that Peter investigate the station. Consequently, there was no point in delaying further.

He rose from the controls and put on an air-helmet. Then, from a dusty and almost forgotten locker, he dug out an explosive pellet handgun and clipped it to his belt. This done, he activated the airlocks, keyed them for re-entrance, and went out into the clearing.

Outside the ship, he headed for the nearest cone, which was the communications-shack. His visual image, checked by the automatic scanner and passed as human, opened the door before him, and he stepped inside.

Within, the body of a man lay sprawled before the deep-space communicator. His skull had been crushed from behind, and the evidence of the blood dried brown on the floor and the partial decay of his body bore witness that he had been dead for some time.

Peter looked around without touching anything; then went back outside and continued his search through the other buildings. It was as he had suspected. No living human remained in the station. Only five silent bodies. And of these, four had been murdered and one was a suicide.

He returned to the communications-shack and called Sector Headquarters.

"Well?" asked Rad Dowell, as soon as his face appeared on the screen.

"How many men," asked Peter, "were here at the station?"

"Five," answered the Commissioner. "One psychologist, three medical technicians, and the station chief, a sort of medical administrator and contact man with the natives."

"They're all dead," said Peter, and went on to recite what he had seen. "Evidently one of the technicians went insane and was confined to the infirmary. Somehow he killed his attendant, broke out and killed the rest of the men, and then hung himself. There's evidence of a struggle in the infirmary, but all the others were killed evidently without warning."

The lines on the Commissioner's face deepened.

"And the serum?" he asked. "It should be in the storehouse next to the culture lab."

"I checked," answered Peter. "The storehouse is empty."

Incredulity replaced the worry etched on the Commissioner's features. "Empty?" he said. "You mean that the drums in the storehouse are empty?"

"I mean there are no drums," Peter informed him.

"But where could they have gone to?" said the Commissioner, bewilderedly. "There must be drums . . . And some of them must contain serum! Find out where they've gone to, Whaley. Ask the natives. There's a translator in the main office that'll make you intelligible to them."

Peter set his jaw.

"There are no natives," he said.

In the screen the Commissioner seemed to sag within his uniform.

"There's hundreds sick here," he said, in a hollow voice, "and nobody knows how many more infected that don't know it yet. On the frontier planets where it started, twenty per cent of the population are dying. And all those people have their hopes pinned on a ship which is on its way to you to pick up the serum that should be stored there. And now you tell me that there isn't any." There was something almost pathetic in the tone of his concluding words.

Peter looked steadily at him.

"What do you want me to do?" asked.

"I don't know," said Rad Dowell. "Find the drums. They must be somewhere. There must be some serum in them. If you can't do that—" his voice trailed off on a note of hopelessness—"wait until the ship comes, I suppose. Perhaps—"

But what the rest of his sentence was, Peter never heard. For at that moment, there was the crash of a heavy body striking the wall of the communications-shack, and the set went dead. The abrupt violence shocked him into a momentary paralysis. For a second he stood there, staring stupidly at the screen as if he expected it to light up again of its own accord. Then, when the patent absurdity of this had

penetrated his mind, he reacted swiftly with an action that was as foolish as it was brave. Unclipping the handgun from his belt, he walked to the door with it held in his right hand, and stepped out into the open.

"HALT!"

For a second, the scene had all the appearance of a tableau. There was Peter, brought to an abrupt halt by what he saw, the pellet gun upraised in one hand, and there was the cause of the disturbance, a group of Tarnian natives, frozen, holding the tree-trunk they had been using as a battering ram on the tower of the communications-shack.

"Halt," he said again, foolishly, for of course it meant nothing to the Tarnians.

After that things began to happen quickly.

The natives, losing their nerve at the actual appearance of the human they had been threatening, dropped the tree-trunk and went bounding in great kangaroo-like hops for the forest at the edge of the clearing. Peter yelled—a quite meaningless and thoroughly instinctive battle-sound—and fired the gun at random. The pellets streamed from its muzzle at ten-thousand feet per second, missed the natives by a wide margin, and blew some fifty square meters of the forest beyond to smoking fragments. The natives, convinced that their doom was inescapably upon them, skidded to a halt and stood, their large, fish-like eyes rolling in terror, antennae quivering, too frightened to either advance into the devastated area or return toward Peter.

"Halt!" yelled Peter, a wild exhilaration filling him at finding himself in command of the situation. "Don't move. I'll be right back."

He might as well have spoken in Sanskrit for all the natives understood but the command was unnecessary. Nothing short of an earthquake could have moved the Tarnian raiding party at that moment.

Peter ducked hurriedly into the main office building, picked up the translator—a dark colored box with two adjustable helmets attached—and ducked out again. He walked up to the raiding party and dropped the "alien" helmet on the an-

tennaed head of the first squat green creature he came to. Then he put the "human" helmet on his own head and switched on the power.

"Who's in charge here?" Peter demanded.

"Not this one, Lord, not this one," chattered the earphones terrifiedly in his ear. "This one loves the lords. This one was made to come here by that one chief—" and a trembling green paw indicated a scowling Tarnian who was glaring at Peter's informant with murder in his eyes.

"Ha!" said Peter. He lifted the "alien" helmet from the head of the one he had been talking to, walked over, and dumped it on the native indicated.

"Are you the chief?"

"This one chief," was the sullen acknowledgement.

"Why did you break the communications tower?" Peter asked.

"Don't want tower," growled the native.

"Why not?"

"This one tower not tree. Break down. This one lord not Tarn-man. Go away."

"Just as I thought," said Peter grimly. "So you were trying to scare me off. Well, I don't scare. What made you decide that you didn't want humans here?"

"Lords take Tarn-blood. Those ones Lords say these ones Tarn-men give blood and those ones Lords protect Tarn-men from devils. Those ones Lords lie."

"Oh?" said Peter. "And what made you think they lied?"

"Those ones lords dead long time now. No devils."

PETER GRIMACED a trifle wryly. The native's logic was simple but definite enough. His thought fast.

"Did it ever occur to you," he said, "that something might still be protecting you from devils?"

"Yes."

The answer stopped Peter. He blinked. "Oh?" he said. "Who, then?"

"The old gods," was the complacent and surprising answer. "The spirit who lives in the village idols protects these ones villages."

Peter shook his head inside the helmet. This kind of crisis in native-human rela-

tions called for a trained administrator. Best to let it ride until the ship got here. But there was one thing he could do.

"In that one building," he said, slipping into the Tarnian phraseology, and indicating the storehouse, "were a lot of large metal drums. Where are they?"

"These ones take," answered the native.

"Bring them back!" snapped Peter.

"Gods say no," returned the other stubbornly. "Those ones drums have Tarn-blood in them."

"But it isn't Tarn-blood any longer, you fool," said Peter desperately. "It's serum."

"Tarn-blood," repeated the native doggedly. "Sacred."

Peter stared at him. The frustrations, he thought, must be making him ill. A strange sort of dizziness made his head swim. Abruptly, he lost all control of his temper—

"Bring them back, damn you!" he screamed, lashing out with his fist at the small native. "Bring them back!"

The native ducked, and the helmet flopped from his head. Finding himself free, he began to run. The others bolted after him, and in a second the clearing was empty, except for Peter.

Dizzily, he turned and headed back toward his ship. Have to report this, he thought, and, with the communications-shack out of order, the only transmitter was aboard his vessel. His emotions seemed oddly difficult to control. Once he turned about in a sudden fit of rage and, screaming curses, sent a stream of pellets to explode into the forest where the Tarnians had disappeared. Then he made his way into the ship and switched on his set, calling Sector Headquarters.

The face of Rad Dowell took form on the screen.

"Hello, Whaley," the Commissioner said. "Any luck?"

"Why should I have luck?" asked Peter, sourly. "The natives are trying to break away from human control. They've reverted to worship of their village idols. They've stolen the serum from the storehouse and won't bring it back."

Rad Dowell shook his head despairingly.

"It looks hopeless," he said.

"Of course it's hopeless," snapped Peter.

"You knew that when you sent me here."

The Commissioner's eyes narrowed suddenly; he looked suspiciously at Peter.

"Tell me, Whaley," he asked, "you had inoculations yourself before you left for the Tarn moon, didn't you?"

"What inoculations?" demanded Peter.

"Why—Tarn itself is the home of the nerve disease!" said the Commissioner. "I thought you knew that. That's why the native blood can be used as a culture for the preventive serum. Only on Tarn it's that much worse, because while the disease runs for the regular two weeks through alternate periods of excitement and lassitude before it kills the patient, there's no incubation period required if you catch it directly from a native carrier. But you must have been inoculated before they gave your ship clearance papers for Tarn from your last stop."

Peter looked at him dully.

"I didn't have clearance papers for Tarn," he replied. "Just for the moon of Tarn." He paused. Somewhere within him, a thick black vein of anger pulsed and throbbed feverishly; the screen in front of him seemed to shake in time with its beating. Then, abruptly, it rose like a fiery tide inside him and rage spewed words from his mouth.

"You knew it!" he screamed, as the walls of the ship spun crazily about him. "You sent me to my death. To my death! *To my death!*" And, whipping the handgun from his belt, he sent it crashing, butt first, directly into the screen.

There was an instantaneous flash of intense, blue-violet light, and the set went dead.

"IF YOU WANT my opinion, Cushey"—began third-mate Ron Parker.

"Which I don't," interrupted the little doctor, bristling.

"As I say," continued the young officer, imperturbably, "if you want my opinion, he's already dead; and we two are going to look like damn fools, leaping off the ship the minute she lands and rushing up to a corpse with revivicator and half the medical equipment the City of Parth carries on board."

He looked moodily out the airlock

scanner, watching the medical station of Tarn II float up to them as the big government-ship eased in for a landing.

"And what if he isn't, hey?" barked Major Cushey. "What if there's a flicker of life left in him and we can bring him back enough to tell us something of what's been going on around here . . . what if he finally found out where the drums are kept, hey? Isn't a thousand to one chance worth a little physical effort, even to you, if it means halting an epidemic? Lazy young lout!"

"Not lazy. Just no point in expecting—" Ron began. A slight jar announced that they had grounded. "Oh, well, here we go, ready or not—" and the two men flipped their air-helmets down over their heads and clipped them tight.

Before them, the outer lock swung open. They leaped out and hit the ground running, Major Cushey bouncing ahead like a particularly energetic, if overfed rabbit, and Ron loping clumsily along behind, the long, awkward bulk of the revivicator clutched lovingly to his chest.

"Try the office building first," Cushey's voice shrilled in the young officer's ear-phones. Ron cursed and followed the shorter man to the building with the Federation flag flying above it. They reached it. The scanner, noting their speed, checked them hastily, and the door swung open. They plunged inside . . .

. . . And skidded to a shocked and startled halt. For rising from a chair to greet them, unsteady, pale, but undeniably alive, was the man they had come to save.

"You'll excuse me for not going outside to meet the ship," he said. "I heard you landing, but I'm a little too weak to walk that far yet."

They stared at him.

"But you're not sick!" said Cushey peevishly, as if it were rather unkind of Peter to be alive at all.

"Not any more," answered Peter, sinking back in his chair.

"How did this happen, this—this cure," barked the little doctor.

"In the most ordinary way," said Peter, "I took some of the serum."

"But you told the Commissioner the natives had taken all the serum there was."

"They had," said Peter. He closed his eyes and chuckled. "I—er—persuaded them to bring it back. The storehouse is full of drums of it right now—a full load for you to take back."

The two officers looked at each other.

"Pardon me," said Cushey, and stepped forward to curl two fingers over Peter's pulse.

Peter chuckled again. "No, I'm quite well," he said. "Look in the storehouse if you don't believe me."

"But how could you do it?" cried Ron . . . *a star-fool, like you!* his words implied.

"Simple," answered Peter. "They thought that their village idols were ample protection against devils—that they didn't need human protection. So I supplied them with a devil that their idols were no protection against. They came crying to me for help. I tottered out into the clearing, challenged It, and when It showed up, blew It to bits." He paused. "After that, they fell over themselves to be good to me. Brought the serum back, and offered to bleed all over the place for me—'course I couldn't take them up on that, not knowing how to make the serum. But when you're ready for them, I can whistle them up in a jiffy."

"But I still don't understand," protested the bewildered Ron. "What was the devil? Where would you get a devil?"

"The devil?" echoed Peter. "Oh, that was George, my specimen collector. Poor George. I hated to blow him to pieces, but it was him or me."

"Specimen collector?" repeated the medical major in an odd tone of voice, applying his stethoscope to Peter's chest. "But I know what they are. They're just small robots that chip off pieces of rock and bring them to you for examination. Ruggedly built, of course; but I don't see what devil-like aspects one of those could have. Your George was utterly harmless."

Peter laughed out loud. And this time he opened his eyes and looked them both full in the face.

"Not," he said, cheerfully, "when he went around on my orders collecting specimens from all of the village idols, he wasn't."



The Canopans silently carried the bodies outside.

LAST NIGHT OUT

by LEE GREGOR

They shoved through the hate-filled crowds of Terra,
looking for a little pleasure, a little entertainment. For
tomorrow Ensign Grey and his blue-furred space-mate,
Canopus 43C, would go off to war—if tomorrow ever came.

THE UNFRIENDLY STREET stretched ahead of them, pouring bitter waves of hostility through their nervous systems. They had ridden the bus from the space-port into town, and now they stood on the pavement soaking up the profusion of sensations which permeated the atmosphere of the brawly town. Joe, his iridescent fur registering a pale

blue of distaste and his antennae quivering in a controlled agitation, kept a warm tentacle curled firmly in the hand of Jed Grey. Since his native name was a soundless, telepathic abstraction, the records of the Solarian Fleet labeled him Canopus 647-B-43C. To Ensign Jed Grey, his Terran team-mate, he was Joe.

The blue of Grey's Space Fleet uniform

matched, for the moment, the evanescent hue of Joe's pelt, as, in a curious manner, the pattern created by Joe's thoughts matched that of Grey.

The sky had created a raucous sunset, challenging the lurid glitter of the neon signs which lined the main street of Selby, Texas. The light reflected garishly from the multicolored and multishaped uniforms which swarmed about the thoroughfare.

Terrans, scaly-headed Arcturians, spined Sirians, the dark and stocky inhabitants of a strange planet which circled a star whose name to Terran astronomers was only a number in the star catalogue—all of these walked in small groups along the length of the street, seeking a spot where they could relax for the evening and forget where they had been or where they were going.

Jed Grey asked Joe, "Where are the rest of your boys?"

Joe allowed his perceptual sense to range through the town, his sensitive antennae erect and rigid. Through the murky welter of conflicting thought patterns he sought the familiar, gentle sensation created by the furred Canopans.

"It's hard to find them," he transmitted to Grey. "I know they must be in town somewhere. They came on the bus before ours. But there are too many Terrans about and it is bad . . ."

JED GREY knew precisely how bad it was. Habitually en rapport with his Canopan partner, he sensed in every nerve the hostile atmosphere of the street, tearing at the hard shell of defense which he had learned to erect.

The Arcturians, habitually suspicious of strange planetary types, were sufficiently unpleasant in their thought patterns. However, it was from the native earthmen, whose blue uniforms vastly outnumbered all others, that the bulk of the torment arose.

Grey could sense it even though he avoided observing their faces. He could feel the alcoholic thoughts of the mechanic across the street: "An earthman holding hands with a snake! Damned snake man!"

It was now months since Grey had learned what that meant. The pain with which

he had learned that was by now gone. He did not think that Joe's tentacles looked like snakes, and he cared nothing for the opinions of the others. Yet it was difficult to keep out of his mind the intruding thoughts of the Fleetmen who glared at him with disgust on their faces.

"I have found the others," Joe thought to Grey. "They are in a small bar at the other end of town called the Purple Claw. It seems to be an interesting place."

There was no need for Joe to ask, "Shall we go there?" For there was no place else to go. This was a repetition of the problem which always occurred when the pair arrived at a new base or a new town. Where could they spend an evening?

It never occurred to Grey that he might go off by himself.

Making their way through the crowded street was no longer the ordeal which it had been when Jed Grey and Joe had first been assigned to work together. By this time it no longer turned Grey sick when a highly-painted female hysterically turned around and whined: "It's reading my mind! The damn snake's reading my mind!"

"I see that the Arcturians hang out at the Zig Zag," Joe observed. The Zig Zag's brilliant mercury-vapor sign made Grey's complexion a virulent blue as they passed beneath it.

"And extra police floating around," Grey noticed. "This is a bad town. Many transients here—on their way in or out. Coming to town for a big time—either the last one or the first one in months."

THE PURPLE CLAW was housed in a ramshackle building of ancient vintage, and sported as publicity a modest violet lobster which glowed erratically above the door.

Within, the air reeked of tobacco smoke, beer, telka. It heaved with the beat of something which was part American jazz, part Sirian drum-music, with a flavor of strains from half a dozen other star-systems.

Behind the bar was a monstrosity of fat character whose hair was white as the clouds of Venus, and whose face was as black as space itself. Elby Jones had a love

for wine and women which was matched only by his addiction to the music which the small band in the corner emitted.

He nodded to the pair as they entered, and waddled over to the small table where they seated themselves.

"Evenin', Joe and Mister Grey," he greeted them. "You'll have Space Punch and smokes?"

This, casually—even though never before had they been in this place.

Just as casual was Grey's reply, "Sure enough, Elby. Nice place you've got."

No need to show surprise at the fact that Jones was, himself, a telepath. The very fact that his place was the congregating point for the Canopan crowd attested to that probability.

With a goblet of warm Space Punch between his hands, Grey leaned back and absorbed the peace and relaxation which he had sensed within these walls the moment he had stepped through the door. Joe, immune to alcohol, took the first ecstatic drag from a long white cigarette—a cigarette of very ordinary tobacco.

Through the dimly-lit, smoke-laden atmosphere of the room, Grey could see the musicians at the far end, the small tables at which the Terrans sat with their Canopan partners, the few Sirians who sat alone with their tekla glasses.

Joe, performing an indescribable feat of mental recognition, happily greeted a Sirian who sat across the room. To Grey the Sirians all appeared identical, but he received the impression that this was the one they'd gone on a tear with last month in Joplin. It had been a most memorable occasion. He suddenly laughed uproariously as he recalled the picture they'd made marching down Joplin's main thoroughfare singing the Sirian national anthem in harmony—with Joe taking two of the parts simultaneously—both mentally.

Joe, having no vocal apparatus, performed his music telepathically. At times it was indescribable, and at other times it was—well—magnificent.

Within the Purple Claw there was music permeating the smoky air, coursing through the nerve channels of the listeners. It was slow and hot, loose and tight at the same time.

Grey slipped down farther into his chair. A horn took a high passage, and the chill began to pass up and down Grey's spine. He knew, then, that he was in—that the night was good and the music right.

JOE'S ANTENNAE swayed quietly, in time with the beat, in time with the antennae of the other Canopans who sat there, spreading a net of rapport through the room. Imperceptibly there was produced an augmentation of the music, a heightened receptivity, as though the entire audience was in itself a musical instrument, guided by the band, and in return leading the band ahead.

"Lawdy, that was good," Grey sighed when the spell finally broke and the audience shuffled feet, scraped chairs, ordered fresh drinks, and relit forgotten smokes.

These moments of complete retreat had become more and more rare during the past few months.

The mobilization had been accelerating, and the training periods had become more and more intense, in preparation for this day when they were now assigned to a ship and were about to push off for a training run, followed by the long trip to the battle sector.

It had been slightly more than a year ago that the first enigmatic events had been noticed in a corner of the galaxy which was just newly being explored and developed. Ships had failed to return—colonies had ceased communicating with their prime bases.

To Jed Grey, a young man still in school on Terra, far within the borders of the civilized galaxy, these events had seemed distant and impersonal. They had been words in the newspapers, on the news broadcasts. They had been vague events taking place on just another of the many hundreds of habitable planets which by that time had been discovered.

Then the knowledge had grown that the events taking place thousands of light years distant were to have an impact on the life of Jed Grey and the others living on Terra. Gradually it developed that the civilized galaxy was rapidly becoming immersed in a struggle for existence against an enemy whose character was initially

somewhat obscure, but whose unfriendly aims were quite definite.

Overnight, it seemed to Grey, Terra flew into a turmoil of mobilization, manufacture of spaceships and weapons, research for the creation of new weapons and new defenses against the strange attack methods of the enemy. In the tiny circle of existence in which he walked, that which he observed was the increased crowds of people on their way to work in the factories, the increased difficulty of buying various items, and inevitably the card which had ordered him to the mobilization center.

Among the many classification tests which they gave Grey was a curious one which seemed nonsensical until later on in the course of his training its purpose became quite obvious. It was given by a young man with very large and quiet eyes, who was seated beside an individual with soft, silky fur that changed color from moment to moment, and whose antennae had a fascinating, restless mobility. The four tentacles were brown and graceful, while the total attitude of the creature was one of repose and dignity.

GREY STARED at this personage with curiosity, and with a slight chill. From photographs he knew the form of the natives of the fourth planet of Canopus, and from rumors and bar-room tales he had heard sufficient concerning them to ring a note of alarm in his brain.

Yet, as he sat there for a moment, the alarm died away for although to his untrained eyes the Canopan was practically featureless, there was an aura of pleasantness about it appearing from a source which at that time he was not able to identify.

Into his mind the thought came, "What if they *can* read my mind, like everybody says? He doesn't look like he would hurt me. But . . ."

The voice of the examiner cut his thoughts short.

"Here are ten cards lying face down on the table. Tell me what markings are on the front of these cards."

"But how can I tell you if the cards are face down?"

The man smiled. "Just try, anyway."

Grey wanted to snort and laugh in the man's face; but then suddenly he shivered, for actually he knew . . .

"Why there's a circle, a square, a triangle, another circle . . ."

Then there was a sealed box in which he identified a cube, a sphere, a cylinder, and a more difficult object which turned out to be a key.

The examiner grinned at him and said, "That's fine. Welcome to the fraternity of telepaths and perceptrons."

And, amazingly, there came a thought of congratulation which was unmistakably from the Canopan, who extended a tentacle and laid it for a moment upon his arm.

A gate in his mind swung open. A flood of memories crowded into his consciousness. Small items. Incidents in which he had known things before he had seen them. Incidents so unaccountable that he had put them out of his mind, had refused to consider them. Now they jigsawed together into a pattern which revolved about the important fact that he possessed the rare skill of perception coupled with telepathy.

How rudimentary this skill was he realized later when his training began.

In a month, feeling drab in his work uniform and exhausted from the preliminary training, he was brought face to face with the Canopan whom he soon learned to call Joe, and who was to become his partner for as long as should be necessary.

THE FIRST MEETING was stilted and formal. They sat in the small room together with the Terran and Canopan training officers, and within Grey there was the nervous sensation that the Canopans recognized every one of his thoughts. There was the embarrassing realization that his dislike of Canopans was as plain to them as the expression on his face, and the embarrassment was intensified by the fact that he had not the slightest idea why the dislike was there.

"Sure, Grey," the officer said, abruptly. "We know you don't like Canopans. Nobody on earth does—except the people who actually know them. We know the whole story. But you'll get over that."

You're going to spend the rest of this war working together with this fellow here—since he doesn't talk a language, he doesn't have a verbal name. You won't have trouble conversing with him, however, because he knows what you think, and you will know what he thinks when he wants you to."

"Then they do read minds," Grey said.

"Sure. What of it? You can almost do it, yourself. Why do you think we picked you for this job? Out of the thousands that we test, a few here and there have the right kind of sensitivity. When the professors learn more about the science of psychomechanics maybe we'll learn how it works. Now all we know is that it works."

"What's wrong with them, then?" The question was involuntary, dropping suddenly from Grey's mouth. Confused by his own frankness, he stammered, "I—I mean, why don't people like them?"

"This is a question with many angles," the officer said, gravely. "It's an old story. We had barely obtained a world government when interstellar travel was on hand and we came into contact with strange types of intelligent beings. Man was still trying to overcome distrust between the slightly different groups within his own species. When he came to deal with species of such strange shapes and psychologies as those on the other planets, the distrust was intensified many times."

"Particularly, people fear the telepathic powers of the Canopans. They fear the mysterious and the supernatural. Telepathy still seems a supernatural thing to the ignorant and—I'm afraid—to some who are not so ignorant. People are afraid of their minds being invaded. Their sense of privacy is outraged."

"They cannot visualize the fact that the Canopans are completely uninterested in what thoughts a Terran may have. The Canopan psychology is sufficiently different from ours that our private thoughts may be interesting, perhaps curious, but never the sort of thing upon which they would put a moral judgment. Their sense of morality is too different from ours for moral judgments to have meaning."

"You may accept this intellectually at

the moment without absorbing it into your system. In a short time you will really be convinced that this is so. In the meantime, the two of you must become friendly enough so that you can perform your jobs."

GREY LOOKED from the officer to his Canopan partner, and clearly received the verification that all of this was really so. Inside Grey there was an impression of relief, a loosening of tensions.

From that moment on, Grey and Joe were inseparable. They lived together, ate together, and in their training they were as one mentality.

"Doggone if you wouldn't think we were married," Grey kept saying.

Surely the extreme rapport, and the warm feeling of relaxation and mental capability which Grey felt when in the presence of Joe, indicated an intimacy which was the equal of any physical attraction.

With the extreme complexity of the control and communication equipment in the great space vessels, there had arisen the need for something radically different in maintenance technicians. The delay of testing circuits for faults and breakdowns had to be eliminated. For this purpose the peculiarly suited Canopans had been brought to Earth by the thousands.

Even in the specialized branch of computing-machines to which Grey had been assigned, the magnitude of the knowledge to be absorbed in a few hasty months would ordinarily have made the task impossible. With the two nervous systems of Grey and Joe acting as one, however, they were able to absorb huge chunks of knowledge at one gulp, assort it, store it away, and go on to the next item.

Carefully supervised by psychiatrists to ensure that no breakdowns would occur from overloading of nervous connections, Grey advanced from the status of an untrained youngster to that of a highly skilled electro-technician.

"Joe, with all the brains that you fellows have," Grey remarked one day, "it's a wonder that you haven't advanced any farther than you have, as far as technical things are concerned. I don't know why you need me around. You know all the stuff that I know, and maybe a lot more."

Why don't you Canopans just take over the whole works?"

"We're really not very interested in electronics and such things," Joe replied. "We put up with this as a rather unhappy necessity, but our creative instincts do not lie in that direction. Since we have developed without hands, and with a brain of capabilities which are strange to you, our culture has become more introspective—more interested in the being within than in the things without—more interested in creating things of beauty to perceive rather than machines of complexity for the control of nature."

"Very pretty," Grey sighed. "And just as well, for otherwise I would be out of a job."

Even so, Grey felt little more useful than a soldering-iron or a screw-driver in the hands of a master mechanic. For Joe, with his ability to perceive without sight, with his capability of feeling the very electric currents flowing through a machine—he was the diagnostician, the one who squatted before a defunct piece of equipment and without hesitation unerringly decided what was wrong with it and directed Grey to the point where the repair had to be made. From that point on Grey wielded the tools.

But there was no room for false pride. The two of them together constituted a working team. The two of them made one mechanic.

In addition to learning the technical things required for maintenance of machinery, both Jed Grey and the Canopan had to learn many other things which inevitably went with their partnership.

They had to learn how it was to walk down a city street and feel the ebb and flow of thoughts about them—thoughts concerning the race of Canopans in general and concerning the type of Terran who would walk down a street arm in arm with a Canopan.

They learned this quickly. Gradually the psychic hurts healed over and in their place was a hard defense-mechanism compounded of wisdom, mental toughness, and a contempt for the opinions of the others.

Actually, to Joe, the opinions of the Ter-

rans were of no interest. But as he once remarked to Grey: "It's an impersonal sort of unpleasantness—like walking through a street filled with a bad odor, like walking through a room filled with buzz-saws. It jars the nerves."

Grey presently came to feel in the same manner.

"I'm not quite a Terran any more," he said.

Joe assented. "You are a real cosmopolitan. You have the real interstellar attitude. In time everybody will see it that way."

TIME—TIME. It went so rapidly. It swept them along through the several stages of their training, and now it was their last night out before stepping into the great battlewagon for the final and irrevocable journey across space to the war, which up to now had been a hazy background to their work.

Elby Jones brought Grey another drink. "It's a good night here tonight."

"I'm glad it is," said Grey.

Yes, it had to be a good night, because the last one had to be good. There had to be that much to remember out there a thousand light-years away.

The music started once more, and it brought to Grey the thought that it was curious how the Canopans had taken to American Jazz and cigarettes and had intensified their effects to a degree previously unknown. What a group of characters they were. They could go on an intellectual jag from a Bach Fugue as quickly as they could go on a nicotine binge. Their entire psychology was geared to the obtaining of pleasure from sensations of many different kinds.

"The Terrans do likewise, you know," Joe transmitted to him.

Grey grinned back at Joe. You couldn't keep a stray thought-wave away from the guy.

"It's different the way you do it," he replied. "You don't get blind stinkin' drunk when you go on a jag. You do it for exhilaration, for an uplift."

"The process of getting stinking is . . ." Joe broke off suddenly.

Simultaneously, Grey could sense that the other Canopans had shifted their attentions, that the music, although it kept playing, echoed hollowly between the walls, unsupported by the listeners.

Grey caught the faint jar of a commotion outside the door. A roar of voices and heavy footsteps crescendoed suddenly as a mob in blue uniforms burst into the place. As it seemed to Grey in the first violent moment, each had a bottle in one hand and a brightly-painted female in the other. There seemed to be a squadron of them. It turned out, finally, that there were perhaps ten altogether.

From the insignia on their uniforms, Grey guessed that these were combat men on their way back from the battle sector, ready to tear up the first town that they hit on the first night out.

"Cripes! The place is full of snakes!" one of them shouted. "What're snakes doing here when there's some good ol' earthmen lookin' for a place to sit down?"

One of the girls pulled back. "Let's get out of here, Jack," she whispered, nervously. "I'm afraid of them snakes."

"They ain't gonna hurt you, honey," Jack told her, hoarsely. "I always wondered if them snakes grew together if you pulled them apart."

He walked a few paces inside the door. "If you snakes can read my mind, you know what I'm gonna do if you don't clear outta here pronto. An' readin' my mind ain't gonna help you against my good right arm."

GREY FELT SICK. A brawl on the last night . . . There was a stray thought in his mind that he and Joe would make a good fighting team if the two of them could coordinate fast enough.

"No," Joe's reply came to him instantly. "This isn't your fight. We'll handle this."

"The hell you say!" Grey attempted to stand—found himself limp as a rag. He could suddenly smell his own perspiration as he strained to move, and as he looked about the room he saw that the other Terrans at the tables were remaining there, their expressions startled and anxious.

The Canopans had risen, and were slowly making their way between the tables to

the front of the room. The band was still playing a slightly mad background to the picture which consisted of the smoky room with the dim lights, the Terrans sitting paralyzed at their tables, the Canopans moving in on the Fleetmen at the door . . . who stared in disbelief, began to swing their bottles, and collapsed quietly on the floor.

The girls, without time to shriek, collapsed just as quietly, and lay there in an unmoving heap.

Grey abruptly was stone cold sober. He wanted out, as fast as possible. The idea of going up for murder appealed to him not at all.

"Forget it," Joe flashed at him. "They're not dead. But we'll have to get rid of them. We'll be back in a minute."

The Canopans silently carried the bodies outside the door, leaving Grey sitting still at his table, performing a great quantity of furious thinking.

Joe was back quickly. He anticipated Grey's questions.

"They'll wake up, and they'll think somebody slipped them a Mickey. But they won't remember what happened."

He hesitated, sat down, and lit another smoke. "You're okay, now, by the way."

Grey tried, and found that the nervous impulses now went where they were supposed to go. He stood up, shakily. Then he sat down again. While he was searching for words to say something, Joe interrupted.

"Look," he transmitted. "This has to be kept under cover. Things are bad enough for us without this sort of thing getting around. I didn't even want you to know, but that couldn't be helped. I didn't feel like getting bashed."

Grey accepted another glass gratefully from Elby Jones.

"Sure," he said. "I don't talk to anybody, anyway. But you have to tell me. How much can you do?"

Joe considered for a moment before replying.

"I don't know, really. Terran nervous systems are not like ours. We have had only a short time to discover what we can do and what we can't do. We don't have real control—although there are certain

possibilities with a modified hypnotic suggestion. At present we are only able to introduce resistances temporarily in certain nerve paths, so that inhibitions are produced."

"So for a while I was just inhibited against standing up, and they were inhibited against being conscious. It that it?"

"Approximately."

Grey sipped from his glass, peering over the edge of it at Joe. Precisely how much was there, he thought, hidden within the recesses of that brain? Just how much did this innocent little character have on the ball?

JOE CHOSE this moment to become taciturn. The music was riding once more, and the place was settling down after the sudden disturbance. It took Jed Grey several more minutes and another glass to throw off the nervous tension which sat like a blanket over his shoulders. Gradually he began to relax, and the warm spot within his belly proceeded to creep up into his head.

"Tomorrow," he thought drowsily, "we will be taking off, and there will be no more of this. No more music except from cans. No more . . ."

Abruptly he realized that the rapport had been broken off again by the Canopans, and that at the other end of town there was the faint howl of the police siren.

"There's a brawl down the street," Joe informed Grey. "Some of our heroes back from the battle sector feel that they haven't had enough fighting."

"I bet you a pack of smokes that the guys in the fight haven't been within a light year of an actual battle," said Grey, dryly. "They're the ones who always try to make like tough heroes when they get back."

Through the Canopan's sense of perception Jed Grey could catch faint impulses of the tumult which filled the street a hundred yards away. There was a violence in the thoughts projected from that area which caused the colors of Joe's fur to shift erratically, nervously. In Grey they caused a tightening of the stomach and a heavy feeling in the chest.

"It hurts almost as much to listen in to a fight as it does to be right in the middle

of it," he remarked. "Why don't you just shut it off if you can't take it?"

"As well try to shut off your sense of hearing," Joe snapped back.

The sirens down the street had wailed to a halt. Grey lit another cigarette and tried what was left in his glass. It was flat. The warm glow which had diffused through his body was gone, and in its place there was a bitter taste and a burning sensation around the eyes.

Abruptly he mashed out his cigarette and stood up.

"The night's washed up," he growled. "Let's get out of here."

Joe, with a thought of regret, assented, and the two of them left.

It was bitter to end the last night upon such an uncompleted note.

THE TWO OF THEM strolled back in the direction of the bus station. The fresh night, bright with the blaze of stars and saloon signs, should have exhilarated them; but the mental tension which filled the street pressed hard on Joe's receptors, and, through him, against Grey.

A pair of police cars squatted at the corner. Fleet Police milled through the crowds, shock sticks in hand. An ambulance helicopter roaring in from the Fleet Base settled down in the center of the street.

The fight was over, but so keyed up were the Fleetmen in town that for Grey and the Canopan to walk through the street was to walk through a sticky, ob-scene glue of malevolence.

Joe's fur colors had faded to a dismal blue. Grey glanced at this with alarm.

The thoughts in the crowd around them had been impersonal ones—fight thoughts, pleasure thoughts, passion thoughts—violent and unnerving to the pair who had to thread their way through this tumult, but yet impersonal.

It began to change.

They began again with the snake thoughts and the thoughts about the Ter-ran who walked with the damn snake. They looked at the pair who walked in their midst, and in their state of excitement with violence not yet out of their minds, there was a redirection of passion from

the recent fight to the new center of attention.

Grey gasped as the force of this new agitation struck them.

The pair of Fleet Police ahead of them changed their direction of motion and started walking towards them. Grey's face twitched as he felt the increased tension within Joe's nervous system.

"Hold it, son," he cautioned. "Remember we're supposed to be tough. Remember the nerves of steel we're supposed to have, like it says in the books."

Joe's grip on Grey's arm tightened, and then relaxed.

"I thought I could take anything. Tonight has been almost too much."

The Fleet Police were directly in front of them. The one on the right pointed at Grey with his stick and began to say something.

The door of the adjacent saloon swung open and a giant of a bearded Fleetman roared out. The girl hanging to his arm caught a sudden sight of Joe, and a burst of fright exploded in her empty little head, shocking Joe with its intensity.

She screamed, "It's thinking about me!"

The big Fleetman clapped his hand to his hip. There was no gun holstered there, but Joe reared back in a dismayed reflex. . . . In the next moment the Fleetman slumped to the pavement, where he lay quite still.

That was all—for a moment.

The Fleet Police looked at Joe and they looked down at the Fleetman. Then they looked back at Joe. One of them stooped down and remained there for a long minute. He rose, and his face was white.

"The guy's dead," he said, and his shock stick came up, pointing at Joe. "You do that?" he snapped.

"He didn't touch the guy," Grey said.

"Maybe yes and maybe no. Guy's don't just drop and die. I think both of you'd better come."

AT THE FLEET POLICE headquarters the medic turned pale when he examined the body. A number of urgent calls were made. The Canopan liaison of-

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ficer arrived after a nasty fifteen minutes during which the doctor and the Fleet Police Commandant argued violently and then stood staring blackly at the floor.

Grey's eyes widened when behind the Canopan there stalked not only the commanding officer of his ship, but the Commandant of the entire Fleet Base.

"The joint's lousy with brass tonight," he flashed silently at Joe as the two of them stood rigidly at attention. "I think you've become notorious."

He caught a sense of amusement from an undetermined source, and in a moment narrowed it down as coming from the Canopan liaison officer.

Good for our side, Grey thought in relief—at least Canopan officers kept their minds unbound by brass. They'd stand behind Joe.

The Fleet Base Commandant knifed Joe with a rigid stare. He spoke rapidly and biting. "It is difficult enough to keep harmony among the various planetary groups at the base without it becoming known that the Canopans can kill Terrans by their mental powers. You have been trained in self-control. By this incident tonight you have jeopardized the morale of all the troops in the region."

The Canopan officer put in gently, "This was clearly a case of self-defense. The Fleetman was drawing a gun."

"Unfortunately for that argument," stated the Commandant, "the Fleetman was not carrying a gun."

"But this 34C could not see in the first instant. His attention was on the thoughts which the Fleetman transmitted at that moment. The Fleetman forgot he was not wearing a sidearm, and in his mind there was the distinct picture of drawing his gun and shooting 34C. To 34C this was the reality of the moment. In his extreme nervousness he misjudged the force needed, and projected a lethal thought."

"A pretty legality," the Base Commandant growled. "Is it self-defense when you kill a person for *thinking* that he is about to kill you?"

"I know nothing of your law," the Canopan replied. "We have warned that an

incident such as this was bound to occur sooner or later in the tense atmosphere of this town. May I suggest . . ."

"I know, I know." The Commandant passed a hand through his hair in disgust. "Your ideas about orienting the entire fleet. Subconscious psychological training . . . still sounds like hypnotism to me. But if we must, then we must."

"And you, Jeffreys." He turned to Grey's ship-commander. "You're taking off tomorrow. You wouldn't want to lose a team, would you?"

"Certainly not, sir." Grey caught the relief in the commander's mind. "They're a good team."

"Then as far as anybody is concerned there has been no incident tonight." The Commandant turned to the medic. "Get that?"

Commander Jeffreys motioned to Joe and Grey. "You two will return to the base with me."

Grey nodded mutely and began to fol-

low the commander out of the door, his attention focussed upon an idea which had sprung into his consciousness during the past minute.

"Look, Joe," he thought. "If you can do that to a Terran, what could you do to one of the enemy?"

Joe began, "If I knew what the enemy was like . . ."

A blast of thought broke into their minds. It blazed a warning signal in vivid, incandescent pictures, and in roaring sound. It said, in numerous and tumultuous manners, Stop where you are—keep out—restricted, confidential, top-secret territory!

Grey jerked his head around. He stared for one astounded moment at the Canopan officer.

Then he was walking out to the waiting helicopter, the palm of his hand moist as he tightly held one of Joe's tentacles.

The people who ran a war were not always the obvious ones, he thought.

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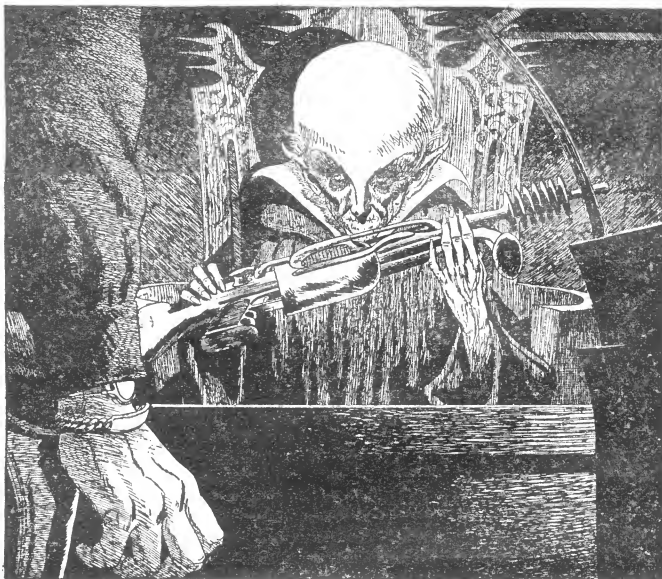
Spot the Bull's-Eye



on the Covers

So unpredictable, these dead-world Tower Dwellers!

Take old Tydore who placed such an inestimably valuable gift in the greed-hands of one he hated.



"I made it for you . . ."

TYDORE'S GIFT

by ALFRED COPPEL

THE sun was a shrunken red disk against the starfields, a distant pale luminosity surrendering to the encroachment of the falling night. Hoarfrost crunched under Marley's feet as he walked by the still black waters of the canal, and then thin wind whispered over the sand and across the breasts of the ancient hills. Starlight gleamed in the dark water as

the day faded, Earth hung low in the sky, like an emerald pendant over the bosom of a sleeping woman.

Marley pulled his silks and furs closer about his shoulders. The air was sharp and cold. His breath froze wraithlike in the icy evening as he hurried down the path toward Tydore's tower.

The green planet shone like a beacon

in his eyes. Home. The thought brought impatience and a longing to walk again under a pale sky and a warm sun. He looked about him with faint distaste. This peace—this solitude of low red hills and blue-black nights—was alien to Marley. It was unreal. Mars was a dream. An ancient wasted slumbering dream.

Marley's lips compressed as he thought of Tydore and their last meeting. It seemed that Tydore laughed at him. Tydore withheld too much, and there was so little time left. There was an acrid core of decadence in the old Martian, Marley thought. A consciousness of too many millenia of civilization and decay. Devious was the word, perhaps, though it seemed a pallid one for the reality of the Martian's intricate mind. It was always impossible to know what he was thinking—how much he knew. About Marley being a spy. About the war on Earth. In spite of himself, Marley smiled. It sounded so melodramatic that way, but it was the way it really was. The Martians held the perfect weapon. Marley needed that weapon, and his nation had put forth a gigantic effort to get him to Mars so that he might steal it.

Tydore's tower loomed up before him in the fading light, a fey filigree of minarettes and graceful flying buttresses too delicate for a grosser world than Mars. The tower's reflection shimmered in the still dark waters of the canal like an alter ego extending deep into the liquid depths.

Marley descended the steps of delicately wrought stone that led to the tower's underground entrance with care, for the drifted ferric sand made them treacherous. How like the Martians, he thought with some irritation, to make it necessary to travel down in order to enter a tower. Everything the long way, the hard and devious way.

The outer doorway was shaped like a fleur-de-lis and it opened from the top down, sliding into a recess of ancient, oily machinery. It would be far too simple to make a door that looked and worked like a door. Everything Marley had seen during his months on Mars served only to increase his sense of alienage. He had seen only Tydore, of course, of the living Mar-

tians. There were only a handful left and they lived in their isolated towers along the still canals surrounded by their tissue-thin manuscripts and ancient, reedlike music spools that filled the air of their retreats with skeins of weird and enharmonic melody.

The weapon was Tydore's. He had rebuilt it from plans drawn by some ensorcelled armorer dead over five thousand years. Rebuilt it in the paradoxical way that Martians seemed to do everything, for if there was one thing that no Martian needed it was a weapon. No strife had marred the planet's peace for millenia. But build it he had, and Marley's hands itched for the sleek deadliness of it—the smooth grained stock, the oddly wrought, ornate muzzle. There was a vicious, tangy violence frozen into every line of the weapon. And it was the only hand gun Marley had ever seen that chained the forces of the atom. With such weapons an army could be invincible.

TYDORE STOOD to greet him. With the elaborate courtesy of his kind, he performed the ritual gestures of welcome, his slender, finely veined hands tracing the ancient symbols in the air.

"The gods of sand and wind have brought you safely to my house, man of Earth. I give thanks and pray you find peace and wisdom within my walls."

The old Martian's chanting voice was like the fluting grace of a Scarlattian choral. It was one with the miniscule paintings that covered the walls, the finely wrought carvings on the antique flagstones under his feet. Marley was not at home in the fluid Martian tongue, but the very sound of the words conjured for him the serried ranks of spectral generations that had reached their culmination in this one robed ancient.

And yet, he thought with irritation, Tydore's words mean not at all what they said. Through the finely polished phrases of welcome ran a thread of hidden mockery—even hate—for Marley and everything he represented. Never once had Tydore, by word or deed, indicated that he felt anything but friendship for his visitor from the silvery ship out on the desert,

and yet there was no mistaking the nuance of contempt. Tydore despised Marley as an outworld savage. One with the despoilers of the holy places of Mars.

Not that the Martians had gods. They had lived too long for that, and their deities existed only in their beautifully turned phrases and their hyper-cultured ritual. But the first men from Earth had looted the libraries and shattered the soaring towers. It was a thing no Martian would ever forget—or forgive. It marked Earthmen for what they were. In Martian eyes—precocious barbarians. Targets for Martian subtlety.

"I give thanks for your welcome," Marley said slowly, his tongue clumsy on the singing syllables.

Tydore inclined his head slightly and indicated that Marley should follow him up the winding ramp that pierced the core of the tower. Each time Marley came, the ritual was the same, as unchanging as the still waters of the dark canals or the frozen loneliness of the red hills beyond. They would pass the first level, where the old engines supplied Tydore with what little heat and sustenance he needed. They would go on to the second level, where the music spools lay in ordered confusion amid the sonic transcribers that Tydore used to weave the sounds of the Martian night into atonal poems of melody. And then they would reach the level of the weapon.

It would still be in its crystal case, guarded by a lock of bronze. A lock to which there was one key, and that one key on a silver chain around Tydore's neck. They would pass the weapon by and seek the top level, a platform shielded against the frigid night by a crystal canopy. And there they would begin their nightly fencing with words and ideas under the guise of friendship.

Marley's heart was pounding suddenly as he drew near to the weapon. His patience was failing him at long last, he knew. He was sick of Mars, sick of Tydore. Sick of posing as a humble seeker after knowledge. If he could not trick the Martian into parting with the weapon soon, he knew that he must chance violence. He had not dared it before, because he could

never be sure that Tydore and his kind were as defenseless as they seemed. It was paradoxical that they should possess a weapon such as *the* weapon and yet be unwilling or unable to use it.

Still it seemed to Marley that such must be the case. He could only explain it to himself by saying that they had lived too long, amid too much deviousness and inverted purpose to be quite virile. They were—the word came readily to mind from the days of his training on Earth—decadent. And the meek did not inherit the earth or anything else, he told himself with satisfaction. Only the militant, the ruthless.

THE TIME HAD COME, Marley thought, for the calculated risk. Direct action. He could scarcely contain himself as they passed the weapon and climbed to the top level.

"You seem preoccupied tonight, Marley," Tydore said, pouring two tiny goblets of wine, "Can it be that you grow tired of Mars?"

Marley sipped the wine thoughtfully. To him it seemed completely insipid and without flavor. Subtlety again? He doubted it. "I mean to ask a favor of you, Tydore," he said, "And I but ponder how I should begin."

"My house is yours," the Martian replied softly, "And all that it contains."

Marley's eyes narrowed. Did he imagine the accent on the last phrase, or was it actually there? He decided to be very cautious. "I came here, as you know," he said, "To learn everything I might about your kind. As you know, we of Earth are a young race, still much in need of guidance and knowledge."

"You have learned much," Tydore said.

Marley's tone grew harder. "But not enough."

Tydore's eyebrows arched delicately. "So? You have read my books, listened to my music. You have tasted the wines and eaten the fruits of Mars. You have seen the stars and the sand, the waters and the lichens. Have you not known my world?"

"I want more," Marley said flatly.

Tydore smiled. In that smile Marley

saw a flash of more distilled venom and ancient hatred that he could have imagined existed. The utter virulence of it left him shaken and his illogical fear brought anger.

He got to his feet, the tiny goblet in his hand. It was old and delicate, a tiny gem of carved jade and ivory. To one such as Tydore—priceless. Brutally, Marley crushed it to shards in his hands and dropped it to the flagstones. The fragments tinkled as they fell.

"So it must always be," said Tydore in a soft voice.

"I have not come here to listen to music, Tydore," Marley said, "Nor to read your books or to know your world. You have one thing that I want. You will give it to me, or I will take it from you." He ground his heel onto the remains of the goblet with a grating sound.

"The weapon," the Martian said, "You want the weapon. You may have it. You need not have broken my goblet . . ."

Marley was almost sorry that he had won so easily. He suddenly wanted to crush the old Martian as he had crushed the goblet. In both there was a quality that eluded him, and it was maddening.

Tydore handed him the key. "Come, we will get it together."

Marley followed him cautiously, alert for any trickery. Presently they stood before the case and Marley unlocked it, reaching greedily for the polished stock. He cradled the gun in his arms lovingly, savoring triumph. With this in his hands, he could defy a world.

"There is no other like it, nor any but I to make one," Tydore said with a strange smile.

"Why did you make it?" asked Marley. "I made it for you."

Marley laughed aloud. It was an alien sound in the thin, cold air of the tower. "You're a liar, Tydore. You built this weapon long before I ever left Earth and you know it."

"By you, I meant simply men like you," Tydore said. "When the first Earthmen came and befouled Mars with their presence, I knew that I must make the weapon." He smiled, showing even white teeth. "A small triumph, but things are

not to be measured by whether they are great or small. Rather by their flavor, their grace, and their neatness, Marley."

"You speak of triumph, old man," snorted Marley derisively, "while your precious weapon is in my hands."

Tydore shrugged. "As I knew it would be one day when I spread the tales of what the weapon would do. It drew you as a lodestone draws a sliver of iron."

Marley felt a pang of panic. "You mean this thing is a fake?"

Tydore shook his head. "No counterfeit. It will do what I said it would do. Kill. What more can one ask of a weapon?"

It was Marley's turn to smile. "Nothing. And there is only this one. And if you were to die . . ."

Tydore smiled a veiled smile. "It is as the gods of sand and wind decree."

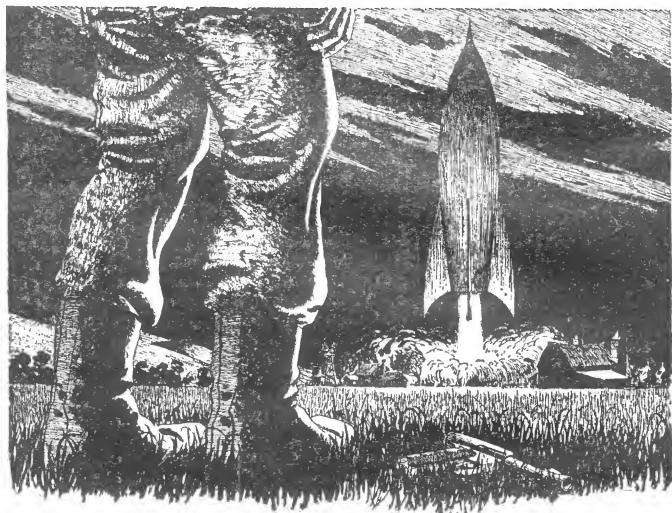
Marley pointed the weapon at Tydore. He had only to kill the old Martian and return to his ship. The mission was over. Completed. He was done with Mars and with Tydore and his subtle scorn.

He cradled the weapon lovingly, laying his cheek to the carved stock. Old Tydore had built well. There was perfect balance in the feel of it. His finger curled around the trigger and he sighted carefully down the long barrel at the robed figure of the Martian. Tydore was smiling in the face of death, and Marley wanted to laugh out loud. This is the way the world ends, he was thinking. Not with a bang but a whimper. He squeezed the trigger . . .

The universe exploded in Marley's face. There was a streak of searing pain that carried away half his face, and as he fell he could hear a strange sound. For the first time, Tydore was laughing aloud. It was a hideous sound. A voice for the torment and hatred of a race that had lived too long, planned too much. Marley felt the tower pinwheel around him, the flagstones leapt up to meet him, greeting the searing agony of his face with the soundless laughter of a million intricate patterns of lonely death. And blackness welled up out of the stones to engulf him, but not before he knew—

Tydore had made the weapon with the muzzle resembling the stock. It was as simple as that.

It had taken him ten years to find them—to even convince himself that they existed. Now Manson was ready to kill!



THE WATCHERS

by ROGER DEE

HE LEFT HIS GRYO ON THE dark lawn and circled the villa, carefully avoiding the wash of light from open windows. The blast gun lay snug and cold in his hand, and his thought ran bleakly: *Here am I, Peter Manson, pacifist, idealist, reformer, preacher in print of tolerance and amity—about to kidnap a man whom I shall almost certainly kill before morning.*

Tomorrow the telecast would list his

madness with other insanities: sex murders, suicides, political drumbeatings for the coming holocaust of the inevitable Fourth War . . .

War.

"They're going too far," he said, half aloud. "Their routine meddlings were bad enough, but another war now might mean the end of everything."

He found the alien who called himself Leonard Havlik in a bright, book-lined

study, packing a miscellany of papers into a brief case that bore his name in gold lettering. A secretary was helping, a slim girl with crisp, copper-colored hair and clear green eyes.

Manson waited, tense with unaccustomed strain. Somewhere a bird trilled sleepily, and the night-wind, fragrant with the smell of trampled clover, blew cool against his damp face.

Irrelevantly, the scene inside reminded him of his own quiet study where he had labored for ten years over the scant gleanings of his search. In that time he had written four books, fighting with a reformer's apostolic zeal to open the eyes of men to their own possibilities, and he had failed.

He had not awakened his kind, but he had found the Watchers. The failure was not his fault. It was *Theirs* . . .

The girl left the room. Manson straightened at his window, bringing up the blast gun.

"Come out, Havlik," he ordered. "Quickly, or I'll blow you to dust where you stand—*Watcher!*"

HIS QUARRY looked up, startled—a small, dark man with a thin, tired face and sparse gray hair, a perfect replica of the million ordinary businessmen his camouflage of humanity aped.

Manson snicked off the safety catch of his weapon, and Havlik came through the window quickly, without protest. Manson prodded him into the gyro and manacled his wrists together.

"We Earthmen have a time-tested proverb," Manson said, "to the effect that you can't fool all the people all the time. I've spent ten years searching for you, Havlik—and here I am."

He set the autopilot for his cabin on Green River, holding his blast gun warily, and sent the gyro slanting upward into the night. Havlik smiled faintly, dark eyes gleaming in the light of the instrument panel.

"Laugh while you can," Manson said grimly. "I've learned something of you Watchers already. I'll know more by morning."

"Force was unnecessary," Havlik said un-

expectedly. "I would have given you information willingly, *since* our mission here is ended. The Kha Niish, who are our masters, have ordered us to leave Earth. Tonight."

Manson stared, the alien's assurance fanning his anger.

"You're lying—you Watchers have mingled with us for centuries, using our own ignorance to set us against each other. You've kept us in perpetual confusion, deafening us with our own bickering while you tightened your hold on us. Now you're fomenting a Fourth War that may wipe us out completely, to save yourselves the trouble of liquidating us directly. You'd never go now, with success almost in your hands."

"Perhaps you mistake our intention," Havlik said. "How do you know you're right?"

"Because men of themselves would not do the brutal, idiotic things that fill the telecasts every day," Manson said. "We are a gregarious people, craving affection—why should we lie and steal and murder each other by the millions? Man is a rational animal, yet he does not behave in a rational manner. By simple induction, the basic cause of his social idiocy stems from outside himself. Someone, or Something, is setting us against each other. I suspected as much ten years ago, and tonight I have proved it."

Havlik shrugged. "You've wasted your time. We leave Earth tonight."

Manson laughed shortly. "*You're* not going anywhere, my friend. I need you for information."

"What else would you know? Our reason for quitting Earth?"

"You're not leaving at all," Manson said, nettled. "You may have planned a routine jump to your base on Pluto, but you're not giving up a juicy plum like Earth. Not after all these years!"

HE PEERED through the gyro's side glass searching for the white peak of Green Mountain to check his position. The skyglow of Denver shimmered in the east, but the peak was lost in darkness.

"You misunderstand our motive," the alien said. "But you're quite right about

our base on Pluto. Induction again?"

"On a different level, yes," Manson said. "Pluto is a solar anomaly—a small, heavy planet where there should be nothing but a larger and lighter world. Pluto was never born to Sol—it's an alien planet, brought in from Outside by you Watchers."

A red light winked on the control panel, and the gyro swerved fractionally. A fiery streak of crimson rocket exhaust flared ahead and vanished, explaining the deviation.

"Seattle-Miami express," Manson muttered. Then the unnatural angle of the exhaust-trail registered, troubling him. "But it shouldn't cross my course—and it should be going up, not down!"

"Your crusade is based on a false premise," Havlik said. "We came to Earth less than fifty years ago, not to destroy humanity but to guide it. The Kha Niish sent us as missionaries, to sow the seed of Their benign culture among men as we have sowed it among a thousand other infant races born into Their galaxy."

The gyro tilted, spiraling down for a landing. A farmhouse, lighted windows cheerful against the dark countryside, rose to meet it. Beside the house, standing on end like a giant cartridge case, Manson saw a sleek, shining bulk—a ship.

He raised incredulous eyes to meet the alien's dark stare. Comprehension stunned him.

"You fiend," he breathed. "You've tricked me somehow—you've played cat-and-mouse with me from the first!"

He remembered the gun in his hand and swung it up.

"Let your weapon drop," Havlik said. "You set the autopilot at my direction. This is our evacuation point."

The gun slid from Manson's fingers. He tried to retrieve it from the floor and cried out, startled, when his body refused to obey.

The alien removed his manacles. "You will be free again as soon as we lift."

"Lies," Manson grated. He fought to break the stasis that held him, veins knotting in his forehead with the effort. "I might have known!"

The gyro landed gently, a hundred yards

from the cylinder.

FIGURES SWARMED about the great ship, pouring up a wide ramp in orderly embarkation. The girl Manson had seen at the villa came running toward the gyro, copper hair blowing in the night-wind.

"You were almost late," she called to Havlik. "We're ready to—" She caught sight of the Earthman and broke off.

In the dark depth of her eyes Manson saw understanding and a great pity, and for the first time it came to him that Havlik had not lied. Aliens they might be, but not destroyers—in this girl burned the same ideals, the same transcendent zeal that drove him. She was as human, basically, as he.

The same will to raise up the helpless is in us both, he thought, The compulsion to carry the saving light of reason to those in darkness . . .

"Wait," he begged. "Your master wouldn't have ordered you away if Earth needed you—and if men can work out their own salvation, then they don't need me, either! Take me with you out there—let me help you, let me see the Outside galaxy of the Kha Niish for myself!"

He spoke to Havlik, but his eyes clung to the girl as to a magnet. She met his gaze fully, the compassion in her own eyes deeper than grief.

Havlik shook his head. "Your sanity would not bear the presence of the Kha Niish, nor of the other races Outside. You are drawn to this girl as to another of your own kind—but do you suppose that the Kha Niish would shape her in Their image? She is like the rest of us, an android creature, refashioned by the Masters to suit the environment of each new world we visit."

The last of the swarming figures vanished into the great cylinder. A muted gong-sound thrummed through the night. A voice called, urgently.

"The Kha Niish did not order us away because men are solving their own problems," the alien said. "We leave you to destroy yourselves, as you will, because man is one of the rare failures of the Galactic Urge. You are a race of incorrigibles."

Later Manson sat woodenly in his gyro, waiting for volition to return, the scent of scorched earth and ozone and trampled clover strong in his nostrils.

We Earhmen have another inerrant old saw, he thought bitterly. An excruciatingly funny one dealing with silk purses and

sows' ears . . .

For a long time he sat quietly, straining his eyes to follow the last faint rocket-streak that arced upward against the stars. Then the stasis that held him fell away, and he reached for the blast gun that lay under his feet.



In the dim Water Temple, where the dead grinned down on the dead, Hale met his D-day. Should he give an ex-comrade to the torturing Lhrai or chance the massacre of Terrestrial thousands?



"I know," Randy said, "I was waiting for that," and he brought the gun down in a calculated arc.

VENGEANCE ON MARS!

by D. B. LEWIS

HALE CUT THE MOTOR AS HE swerved off the ancient plastic roadway. His one-man beetle thumped over the shoulder and, wheels whispering, coasted down the sandy, moonlit slope. It threaded between mighty *linla* cacti that had the size and shape of spaceships towering

grey in the night. He braked it to a slanting stop and got out, a big, long-legged man who carefully kept the little car between himself and the Martian water-temple that sat a short distance away where the dunes of the desert began. He thought, Strange to be afraid of getting

shot by Randy.

Weiss said, from the shadows, "Better get out of the moonlight, Hale. That beetle won't stop a blaster bolt."

Hale crossed to the clot of men that made dark blurs under the *linla*. Weiss said, "What took you so long?"

Hale said, "I had to get my gun recharged. Sturm was working on it when Sam came busting in the shop and told me you'd cornered Randy." He touched the blaster at his belt, then brought up the hand to get out a cigarette from his jacket pocket. He struck a match on the blaster butt. "Why call me? Why not call the Patrol?"

Someone stirred in the darkness, clearing a throat. "Patrol never hung a looter yet and as long as Boss Ricco kicks back to Patrol brass, they never will. This one, we'll take care of personally. The redboys want him."

OVER the cupped match flame, Hale sent a hard glance in the direction of the voice. "Eight, ten men aren't enough."

Weiss said placatingly, "We were tipped that he'd try this temple. We were waiting for him, but he got past us. First thing we knew, he killed the guardian inside. We heard the shot. We called on him to surrender, but hell, he knows what the redboys will do to him if we get him alive."

Hale said again, "Why call me?"

"You know these old water-temple. One narrow entrance, no windows. He can't get out, that's for sure, but we can't get at him without losing a lot of men." Weiss put a hand on Hale's arm, and Hale moved impatiently and Weiss took it away, saying, "You know Randy better'n any of us."

"We came to Mars together," said Hale. "We worked our way out on the same crate. We started our farm, but Randy didn't stick. He said there was always easy money on a frontier, and Mars shouldn't be any different. Said he preferred four ladies to a hoe."

"He should've stuck to cards," said the man who had cleared his throat.

George Weiss said, firmly, "We want you to go in and talk to him. You were

his best friend. He'll listen to you. Tell him it's no use."

Hale said, "That's what I figured." He turned to look at the temple, squat and white in the gloom. The doorway was tall and thin and dead black, and behind it, part of the blackness, was Randy and his gun. And he'd be desperate. As Hale turned back he caught a faint, acrid odor, and he knew that a Martian was nearby, crouching, waiting to see that this was done right.

"There've been a hundred temples stripped of their twin-stones in the past year," Weiss said. "Our redboys are getting fed up with it. The C. A.'s too busy whipping the climate to tend to looters, and the Patrol buys its liquor and mammas with loot money. Half the law is too damned busy, and the other half's crooked—and we're in the middle. The redboys have run out of patience."

Hale nodded. "My own redboys are ready to go on the warpath. Okay. So Randy's the goat elect. So relax and starve him out."

"They want him tonight. We promised —"

"All right, go keep it. Hell, I didn't promise anything. Damned if I'll risk my neck to—"

"—promised to deliver," Weiss went on flatly, "bacuse we had to. We're in a nut-cracker, Hale. The *Ihrari* priests are set to trigger another Green Spot unless they get Randy to play with. Deadline's dawn."

Hale remembered Green Spot. It was a bloody, terrible memory. Green Spot had been one of the earliest and largest farm-settlements on Mars. One night, for some other-worldly reason that the Colonial Authority was still puzzling about, the Martian workers had slit two hundred Terrestrial throats and vanished into the red desert. The *Ihrari* priests had conveyed regrets, assuring the Authority at the same time that there had been adequate provocation for the act. And the Authority, horrified for its sixty thousand colonists, had admitted that there must have been.

Hale thought back, in conflicting terms of personal friendship and unit survival. These men in the shadows; most of them were his friends. He had worked with

them, leaning on hoes in the fields or sitting in the enclosed warmth of a back porch discussing the perversities of Martian geochemistry. He had helled around Firstport with them, had often led them in the helling. His wife was the friend of their wives. While Randy—

Randy was five years ago. Randy was thirty acres of crops dumped in Hale's lap when they'd needed working. Randy was a bitter girl named Susan who waited on tables in New Chicago halfway across Mars, and the son he never cared that he'd given her before he went away.

"Wait here," said Hale in a sour voice, and tossed away his cigarette. "I'll see what I can do."

THE TEMPLE was hexagonal, featureless save for the black slit of the doorway, smooth native marble gleaming under Phobos' dim silver.

He stopped a few feet away and called, "Randy, it's me. Hale. Don't shoot. I'm coming in to talk to you."

Randy's voice, soft and oddly echoed by the temple walls, floated from the black slit. "Come on in, Hale. I won a bet with myself, that they'd holler for you."

Hale walked on, slowly, one hand brushing his blaster butt at each step. Again the sensation of strangeness, of wrongness, that he should be afraid of being shot by Randy. Five years ago Randy had been a lean, fox-eyed kid, inclined to be touchy, but no hard-case. But after five years in the excrement canal-towns, the smoke-filled dives where a coin on the bar bought a drink or a drug and, more covertly tendered, a life—five years in a sour pool, floating with the scums that even fresh water collects when it settles—and now, a looting and a killing—

Hale felt cold, and he was perspiring. The blaster was a solid weight on his thigh.

He reached the doorway and stood uncertainly, knowing the men behind him were watching him. Wondering if he'll kill me, he thought. Maybe he's turned into a ring-tailed killer. Kid, kid, why did you have to do it? Why didn't you get off Mars, like I told you to?

The hollow, echoed voice said, "Come on in. I wouldn't shoot you, Hale." But

the voice had a thin sound to it, and Hale thought, He might.

The doorway was about two feet across, in a wall six feet thick. Smooth marble rustled the leather at Hale's shoulders as he entered the thick blackness. Three paces, echoing, and his fingertips told him he had reached the interior. He felt with his feet, located the top of the shallow steps that every such temple contained—five steps down into a trench which had once held precious water, then three steps up to the temple floor. His bootheels rang sharply—five, two across the trench, three—then he stood in darkness, waiting.

Randy said, "You've gained some weight, Hale. Or is it the jacket?" Sort of amused, but with that same thin sound.

Hale said, "Both." He took a forward step, at an angle, and saw the faint flood of moonlight appear on the temple floor and knew that Randy could no longer see him. He said, "Weiss said to tell you it's no use."

"George's out there, eh? Thought I recognized his voice. I wonder who tipped them off. I've made some enemies along the canals, I suppose."

Startlingly, a match flamed in the blackness, became an orange glow that rose to the cigarette between Randy's lips. He was over near a wall, his gun in his other hand. He puffed hard and his face glowed masklike, his eyes seeking Hale.

Hale, blinking, saw that Randy hadn't changed much. He was still dark and slender, his brown eyes large and bright. But now his hair came down fully to the fur collar of his jacket, in the manner of the canal crowd. The movement that brought him to Hale's side was graceful.

"How many are they, Hale? Think I could break for it?"

Hale said, "It'd be quicker than the redboys."

Randy pulled in a hard breath. "My blaster's jammed. They could've nailed me any time they felt like it. It's been hell, waiting for that." He looked at the gun. The hand that held it was trembling.

Hale sighed. "I guess I could walk you out at gunpoint, then, but I don't want to do that. Come out with me on your own hook, Randy. You've played your four

queens till now, but you drew a bad hand tonight."

RANDY drew unsteadily on his cigarette. Hale, looking beyond, saw the dark mass near one wall that must be the guardian. The stain on the fur robe was black. The blind sockets in the skull of the *Lhari*, who sprawled batlike against the chanting wall, were black too.

"I didn't want to shoot the redboy," Randy slowly holstered the gun. "I slugged him, but he had a hard head. He came at me with a knife while I was prying the twin-stones out of the idol. Why couldn't he lay quiet? I never wanted to kill anybody." His eyes found Hale's in the gloom, and the brightness in them tonight was mostly fear. "You always said I ought to get off Mars. Last week, I decided to. But I didn't have any money, so I went to Ricco. He wouldn't trust me off-world with his money, but he said he had a tourist interested in a good set of twin-stones. He said there was five thousand in it for me. He said there was a good pair here, and—"

He stopped short, his young face hardening with shocking suddenness. "By the red gods, *Ricco!*" he ground out. "Of course—he tipped them off I'd be here. So he'd have me killed over a girl, damn his black soul." He spun away from Hale in a violent motion, his thin mouth feral with rage. Hale waited in the blackness and slowly Randy turned back. Carefully he flattened the cigarette his clenching fist had bruised. "Why didn't I think?" he almost whispered. "They told me he was after my skin—"

Hale started to say something, but Randy's hands were suddenly tight on Hale's arms, and his breath carried the taint of *ingue* liquor to Hale's nostrils. "Hale, you've got to help me. I want to get off Mars. That was why I did it. It was my first mark. Oh, I've drifted the canals and chilled some decks, but this was my first mark—"

Hale said, "I came in to try to help, Randy. If you'll walk out with me, it'll be easier all around."

Randy shook his head fiercely. "Lord, you don't want them to turn me over to

the redboys, do you? The *lhrai* priests can peel a man and keep him alive for days—"

Uncomfortably, Hale said, "I couldn't help you if I wanted to. They're waiting outside."

Randy took breath through his teeth. "Just stay here. Let me walk out. They won't blast, thinking it's you. Is your beetle anywhere near the temple?"

"They're practically sitting on it."

"Then I can break for the desert. It's a good chance in the dark. I can cut up along Coprates to Freightport and—"

Hal said, "No, Randy."

Randy laughed softly, and the laugh had all the old familiar recklessness in it, but it couldn't hide the fear. "You will, Hale. I got into this mess trying to do what you always told me to—get a new start on some other clod. There are plenty of jobs on Venus. Maybe I can still stowaway to Venus. I swear that's where I'll go, if you'll only let me through that door."

"Venus has a skid-row, too."

"I'm through with it. So help me!"

"You killed that redboy."

"He tried to kill me. He knew I had a gun. What was I supposed to do? Only a redboy—"

Hale said slowly, "What about George and the others? I'll have to face them on this."

"They'll find you on the floor with a lump on your head. They'll never hold it against you." Randy spread his hands. "I'd rather you'd kill me—now—than take me out there for the redboys."

HALE felt baffled. It had been like this in the old days, Randy had always had his way. Coming to Mars in the first place had been Randy's idea, and he'd pressed it, and Hale had done well on Mars. Maybe Randy had a break coming. Hale thought, five years isn't such a long time, after all. He said tiredly, "All right. You can have your chance. Good luck. And I'll take those twin-stones, Randy."

Randy let out a long sigh and looked up at the roof of the temple, as if he could see far-off Venus in that thick blackness. He brought the glowing stones from a pocket. "Here's Phobos—here's Deimos," he

said wryly. "I thought maybe you'd forget."

They were heavy in Hale's hand. He said, "So long."

Randy said, "One more thing, friend," and there was an undefinable something in his voice. "I'll need a gun. You'll lend me yours, won't you? They'll think I took it." He reached over and slid Hale's blaster from his holster, and brought the glowing coal of his cigarette close to the dial on the butt. "Fully charged. Well, I may need every shot—" his eyes met Hale's, and that undefinable something was in them too—"for those meddling bastards outside. I owe them for tonight. Now—" He took a step toward Hale, hefting the gun and raising it to strike.

Without thought, with only a sick feeling all over, Hale stepped back. The twin-stones clicked on the floor at his feet. "Wait, Randy. You should've slugged me first . . . I don't think I want to let you go after all."

Randy's grin was frozen, and Hale now had a name for that something, a kind of shame. "I know," Randy said, "I was waiting for that," and he brought the gun down in a calculated arc.

Hale tried to duck, but Randy had the edge. The gun-barrel slammed into his temple. Agonized, he threw up an arm. It chopped against Randy's wrist, and fire and thunder erupted in the blackness. The gun clattered on stone and from somewhere came Randy's furious cursing, "Damn you, Hale, you did that! Now I'll never—" Then Hale was alone in the temple with his pain.

He heard the click of bootheels as Randy leaped over the trench, the hollow thudding

down the corridor doorway—then the shouts and the roar of blasters and the intolerable glare, a stark wavering white rectangle that washed across the floor from the doorway to flicker upon the stony wings and beast-face of *Lhrui*—and the spasmic scream of a man dissolved in flame.

He got to his feet and leaned wearily against the wall, face gaunted by pain, wondering if Randy had known only at the last how ruthless he had become. Life was cheap enough out here on a red world where red insects bred in your eyes and red beasts swallowed you and let their juices do the killing, and it took a good man to fight the alien fight. But when the wrong kind of man came along, it was a knife in the back and life had no price at all. That kind of man had to be reckoned on, Hale thought bleakly—the bad penny that wouldn't even go away, hard and shiny and newly made, like Randy—for values slipped in the rat-race that was any frontier, and the urge to prey, for profit, for power, lay close under a man's skin. Hale sighed. He had hoped for a while—but no; Randy's stamp had been the bloody stamp of the canals, and that stamp would sooner or later have cancelled out other lives, on Venus or wherever he took it.

Better now, Hale thought, than hunted down the years . . .

George Weiss said, from close by in the darkness, "We got him, Hale. Are you bad hurt?"

Hale pressed his temple, and said, "I'll get over it," and meant the pain in his head. Time would have to work to erase the deeper ache.

*Eden could not have been half so good. Delicious fruit.
An everlasting sun. Six-limbed people fevering to serve the
fallen Sky Gods. Yet every Eden has a secret serpent . . .*

HOSPITALITY

by J. W. GROVES



THE PLANET HAD no axial rotation of its own. They landed on the permanently sunward side, the reaction-tubes in the shoulders of their suits lowering them gently through the branches of huge fern-trees on to green-blue, moss-like grass.

Durgan threw back his helmet revealing sharp thin features, pale-blue furtive eyes. Brent, more suspicious of the information in the Index of Habitable Planets, waited for the built-in indicator of his suit to confirm the air as breathable before he uncovered his round, balding head.

"Hope the natives are like you said."

"Sure they are," said Durgan. "I read all about 'em in a book by a guy named Taylor. They're hospitable. Do anything to make a stranger comfortable and happy. It's part of their religion."

"Taylor only stopped here for twelve hours. We got years . . ."

"Oh stop whining. Did you have any better idea for getting us out of that jam?"

Brent shook his head. The idea was smart enough. Right now the patrol was chasing their empty automatically-piloted ship. Soon they would see it crash on the outermost planet of this system. And if, as a precautionary measure, they decided to land and analyze its contents they would find quite enough organic molecules to account for two dead outlaws—thanks to the food converters which had been working at full capacity for days. With reasonable luck the names of Brent and Durgan would soon be struck off the roll of wanted men.

"That part's all right," he admitted. "But hell!"

The natives had come out from between the shadowy fern-trees with startling suddenness. Great purple-colored brutes they were, six-limbed, yet still vaguely humanoid in shape in that they had a distinct body and a head above it. Their eyes were green, unwinking, and just below the eyes was a round permanently-open orifice with harp-like strings stretched across it.

Durgan saw Brent snatch at his bolt-gun and moved to stop him. Then he dropped his hand as the other man let his fingers fall away from the weapon. The purple creatures were bowing obsequiously and gesturing toward two structures slung

from the broad shoulders of four of their number.

"Litters," said Durgan happily. "To carry us to their village. Didn't I tell you?"

The natives responded to the sound of his voice with a joyous humming and more deep bows.

Brent grunted. "How're we going to talk to them?"

"We won't need to talk to them," said Durgan. "They'll look after us without being told." He tugged resistingly as one of the natives would have taken from him a foot-square case to carry on another litter. "No thanks pal. I'll look after the space-radio myself. We're gonna need that so we can get ourselves picked up as castaways once the heat's off."

News of their coming had evidently been sent ahead of them for a fresh hut, larger than the rest, was being finished. The two men were escorted to it, and their litters gently lowered to the ground.

"None of the comforts of civilization," said Brent. "But I think you're right. We're going to be well looked after."

Durgan nodded.

Brent, ignoring him, was sampling some gaudy looking fruit. He grunted his satisfaction. "Try one," he said. "They're good."

Between them they cleared the bowl of fruit and started in on the next one that was immediately produced. Durgan gave up first. Brent managed to keep going for ten minutes longer. Finally even he had to stop.

He patted his rotund stomach and grinned at the circle of purple green-eyed faces around him. "That, my humming-birds, was swell. And now I think I'll have a nice after-dinner snooze."

The anxious-sounding humming mingled with his dreams so that he had to blink for some seconds before he came fully back to consciousness to find purple hands pawing at him, shaking him gently. As soon as he sat up the natives fell back.

He chuckled at Brent who was swearing vividly. "Wonder why they did that?" he said. "Maybe afternoon sleep is against local etiquette or something. Oh well it doesn't matter much."

"It might not matter much to you," said

Brent sulkily. "But me, I enjoy my after dinner nap."

"Then this is where you start to learn better habits." Durgan rolled off the pile of aromatic dried leaves on which he had been lying and went over to the space-radio. "This thing's undetectable so long as you use it for reception only. Let's see what programs we can pick up."

HE FOUND AN OLD broadcast that had been spreading out through the universe for years. It was faint and rather badly marred by static but he enjoyed himself for a while listening to long-familiar tunes. Then he noticed that the gathered natives were twitching to the rhythm of the orchestra. "Wonder if we could teach them to dance?" he said.

The natives were obsequiously willing. Unexpectedly, their dancing, completely extempore, had a certain wild grace of its own despite their grotesque appearance. And when the two men tired of watching that Brent suggested that they might be taught to run races.

By the time they were both hungry again Brent owed Durgan half a million interstellar credits, and two tons of ore-mite. It didn't really matter very much.

When they were comfortably replete they leaned back on their sweet-smelling couches. Durgan looked up at the sun still standing unmovingly at its zenith. "You," he said gravely, "are a liar. You can shout its always midday as much as you like but my wrist-chron says its eleven P. M. Bedtime." He turned his head lazily. "We'd better get them to shift this stuff inside the hut for us. Won't be able to sleep properly out in the light."

It wasn't so funny this time when the anxious humming and the gently shaking hands woke him up. "Let me alone," he said irritably. "What's the matter with you?"

For a moment or two he sat up glaring at the ring of them that was gathered round him. They hummed joyously. "I don't see what the hell there is to be so pleased about," he snarled.

"Nor me neither," growled Brent.

Durgan lay down again. The purple hands were shaking him almost before he

closed his eyes.

At the end of two more hours of it Brent was spluttering with fury. He jerked out his bolt-gun. "Let me sleep, damn you," he yelled, "or I'll use this on some of you . . ."

"Don't be a fool," snapped Durgan. "They don't understand a word you're saying. And if we start shooting we'll arouse their hostility."

"They're arousing my hostility right now," said Brent.

"Forget it! We're absolutely dependent on them to keep us alive for the next few years." Durgan got to his feet. "We'll have to try to keep awake a bit longer. Wait till we see the rest of them turn in."

Their hosts were delighted when they came out of the hut. Fresh fruits were piled in front of them. Dancing and the running of races was resumed. But each time either of the men dozed off quietly every other activity ceased and solicitously humming natives gathered around him, gently shaking and prodding . . .

"It's no good," snarled Brent after being pulled back to consciousness for the twentieth time. "I just can't wait for their bedtime, whenever it is. Either I sleep or I start shooting."

Durgan nodded. "I'm beginning to feel the same way myself. Tell you what, we'll go for a walk in the forest and try to shake them off. Then we can hide ourselves in the branches of a tree. It won't be too safe, I don't know what sort of wild life there is loose on the planet, but we'll have to chance it."

THE NATIVES seemed distressed at the idea that they should want to go out into the forest unescorted. But after a lot of emphatic gesturing the men got their own way. They wandered wearily for a couple of miles and then scrambled up into the lower branches of a huge tree.

"Now," grumbled Brent as he fastened himself into place with his belt. "Maybe we can get a little shut-eye."

It was the sound of a spitting bolt-gun that awakened Durgan. He came hazily back into consciousness, sandy-eyed, and blinked for a moment without understand-

ing at the two still, purple figures that lay at the tree's foot.

"You damned fool!" he snarled.

"I had to," growled Brent. "They woke me up. Again."

Durgan groaned, stretched himself as best he could in his awkward position. "Now we've started shooting we'll have to keep it up." He drew his own gun. "I'll cover you for an hour. Then you can take over."

It was the longest hour ever. His eyelids were made of the stuff of dwarf stars. The figures on his wrist-chron were embedded in molasses.

Twice he snapped shots into the shadowy forest but he was never sure whether he fired at anything real or at conjurations of his own half-dreaming brain. When at last it came to the time for Brent to take over he was asleep almost before the tubby little man had drawn his gun.

The soft hands that dragged him down out of the tree, that made his stumbling feet start walking, were nightmare, pure nightmare. They had to be . . .

He heard Brent sobbing. "I only went off for a moment. I couldn't help it. And then they came and took our guns away."

He still had strength enough left to curse the tubby man viciously.

But even that much energy drained from him as the long hours crept by. Under the irresistible thrust of powerful purple hands he staggered up and down a patch of soft grass between the towering trees.

The creatures around him were fiends. Fiends from some forgotten hell ruled by that scorching monster above. His wrist-chron was a cunning device for torturing him because it lied that another night had come and gone while the blazing ball in the sky screeched triumphantly that it was still noon.

A flickering moment of sanity came to him. He'd read somewhere of a man falling to sleep while he walked along. Maybe it could be done.

He screamed and started to cry abjectly as the goad pierced searing agony into his thigh.

He heard Brent's croaking voice, "The

space-radio. I got to get to the space-radio. Call the patrol. They'll take us away from this."

It would have mattered a lot once but it didn't matter now. Nothing mattered now except that they wouldn't let him sleep . . .

THE CAPTAIN of the patrol cruiser found them still stumbling up and down the clearing, a dozen mournfully humming natives behind each of them, prodding them on. The Captain had heard of the purple creatures' reputation for hospitality. He blinked with amazement and when he had safely secured the two prisoners he sent for the language expert among his crew and set him to work.

The natives' language was unique in that its variations were purely tonal. The expert had a tough time trying to make sense of it but at last he succeeded. And when he was able to give a rough translation of what the creatures had to tell the Captain started to laugh.

Extract from Report No. 1586A/B

From:—Captain of Patrol Cruiser 'Stella'
To:—Central H.Q.

The reputation for hospitality enjoyed by the natives of this planet is fully justified. Their religion enjoins them to treat all strangers, particularly those that descend from the heavens, as sacred.

The plan of escape concocted by Durgan and Brent might well have succeeded but for one detail, the planet has no axial rotation.

The natives have never known night and consequently never evolved the ability to sleep. To them there is only one sort of unconsciousness, that caused by illness or death. Since their guests were not dead they argued that they must be suffering from a hitherto unknown disease.

The medical system of these creatures, though effective in many ways, is essentially empirical. To treat a disorder they attack the symptoms.

When we arrived on the planet they were still conscientiously trying to find a cure.



LORD of a THOUSAND SUNS

*A Man without a World, this 1,000,000-year-old
Daryesh! Once Lord of a Thousand Suns, now
condemned to rove the spaceways in alien form,
searching for love, for life, for the great lost Vwyrdda.*

“YES, YOU’LL FIND ALMOST anything man has ever imagined, somewhere out in the Galaxy,” I said. “There are so damned many millions of planets, and such a fantastic variety of surface conditions and of life evolving to meet them, and of intelligence and civilization appearing in that life. Why, I’ve been on worlds with fire-breathing dragons, and on worlds where dwarfs fought

by **POUI ANDERSON**



He saw fire blossom in space as the great guns of Vwyrdda opened up.

things that could pass for the goblins our mothers used to scare us with, and on a planet where a race of witches lived—telepathic pseudohypnosis, you know—oh, I'll bet there's not a tall story or fairy tale ever told which doesn't have some kind of counterpart somewhere in the universe."

Laird nodded. "Uh-huh," he answered, in that oddly slow and soft voice of his. "I once let a genie out of a bottle."

"Eh? What happened?"

"It killed me."

I opened my mouth to laugh, and then took a second glance at him and shut it again. He was just too dead-pan serious about it. Not poker-faced, the way a good actor can be when he's slipping over a tall one—no, there was a sudden misery behind his eyes, and somehow it was mixed with the damndest cold humor.

I didn't know Laird very well. Nobody did. He was out most of the time on Galactic Survey, prowling a thousand old-rich planets never meant for human eyes. He came back to the Solar System more rarely and for briefer visits than anyone else in his job, and had less to say about what he had found.

A huge man, six-and-a-half feet tall, with dark aquiline features and curiously brilliant greenish-grey eyes, middle-aged now though it didn't show except at the temples. He was courteous enough to everyone, but shortspoken and slow to laugh. Old friends, who had known him thirty years before when he was the gayest and most reckless officer in the Solar Navy, thought something during the Revolt had changed him more than any psychologist would admit was possible. But he had never said anything about it, merely resigning his commission after the war and going into Survey.

We were sitting alone in a corner of the lounge. The Lunar branch of the Explorers' Club maintains its building outside the main dome of Selene Center, and we were sitting beside one of the great windows, drinking Centaurian sidecars and swapping the inevitable shop-talk. Even Laird indulged in that, though I suspected more because of the information he could

get than for any desire of companionship.

Behind us, the long quiet room was almost empty. Before us, the window opened on the raw magnificence of moonscape, a sweep of crags and cliffs down the crater wall to the riven black plains, washed in the eerie blue of Earth's light. Space blazed above us, utter black and a million sparks of frozen flame.

"Come again?" I said.

HE LAUGHED, without much humor. "I might as well tell you," he said. "You won't believe it, and even if you did it'd make no difference. Sometimes I tell the story—alcohol makes me feel like it—I start remembering old times . . ."

He settled farther back in his chair. "Maybe it wasn't a real genie," he went on. "More of a ghost, perhaps. That was a haunted planet. They were great a million years before man existed on Earth. They spanned the stars and they knew things the present civilization hasn't even guessed at. And then they died. Their own weapons swept them away in one burst of fire, and only broken ruins were left—ruins and desert, and the ghost who lay waiting in that bottle."

I signalled for another round of drinks, wondering what he meant, wondering just how sane that big man with the worn rocky face was. Still—you never know. I've seen things out beyond that veil of stars which your maddest dreams never hinted at. I've seen men carried home mumbling and empty-eyed, the hollow cold of space filling their brains where something had broken the thin taut wall of their reason. They say spacemen are a credulous breed. Before Heaven, they have to be!

"You don't mean New Egypt?" I asked.

"Stupid name. Just because there are remnants of a great dead culture, they have to name it after an insignificant valley of ephemeral peasants. I tell you, the men of Vwyrdda were like gods, and when they were destroyed whole suns were darkened by the forces they used. Why, they killed off Earth's dinosaurs in a day, millions of years ago, and only used one ship to do it."

"How in hell do you know that? I didn't think the archeologists had deciphered their records."

"They haven't. All our archeologists will ever know is that the Vwyrddans were a race of remarkably humanoid appearance, with a highly advanced interstellar culture wiped out about a million Earth-years ago. Matter of fact, I don't really know that they did it to Earth, but I do know that they had a regular policy of exterminating the great reptiles of terrestroid planets with an eye to later colonization, and I know that they got this far, so I suppose our planet got the treatment too." Laird accepted his fresh drink and raised the glass to me. "Thanks. But now do be a good fellow and let me ramble on in my own way.

"It was—let me see—thirty-three years ago now, when I was a bright young lieutenant with bright young ideas. The Revolt was in full swing then, and the Janyards held all that region of space, out Sagittari way you know. Things looked bad for Sol then—I don't think it's ever been appreciated how close we were to defeat. They were poised to drive right through our lines with their battle-fleets, slash past our frontiers, and hit Earth itself with the rain of hell that had already sterilized a score of planets. We were fighting on the defensive, spread over several million cubic light-years, spread horribly thin. Oh, bad!

"Vwyrdda—New Egypt—had been discovered and some excavation done shortly before the war began. We knew about as much then as we do now. Especially, we knew that the so-called Valley of the Gods held more relics than any other spot on the surface. I'd been quite interested in the work, visited the planet myself, even worked with the crew that found and restored that gravitomagnetic generator—the one which taught us half of what we know now about g-m fields.

"It was my young and fanciful notion that there might be more to be found, somewhere in that labyrinth—and from study of the reports I even thought I knew about what and where it would be. One of the weapons that had novaed suns, a

million years ago—

"The planet was far behind the Janyard lines, but militarily valueless. They wouldn't garrison it, and I was sure that such semi-barbarians wouldn't have my idea, especially with victory so close. A one-man sneakboat could get in readily enough—it just isn't possible to blockade a region of space; too damned inhumanly big. We had nothing to lose but me, and maybe a lot to gain, so in I went.

"I made the planet without trouble and landed in the Valley of the Gods and began work. And that's where the fun started."

Laird laughed again, with no more mirth than before.

THERE WAS A MOON hanging low over the hills, a great scarred shield thrice the size of Earth's, and its chill white radiance filled the Valley with colorless light and long shadows. Overhead flamed the incredible sky of the Sagittarian regions, thousands upon thousands of great blazing suns swarming in strings and clusters and constellations strange to human eyes, blinking and glittering in the thin cold air. It was so bright that Laird could see the fine patterns of his skin, loops and whorls on the numbed fingers that groped against the pyramid. He shivered in the wind that streamed past him, blowing dust devils with a dry whisper, searching under his clothes to sheathe his flesh in cold. His breath was ghostly white before him, the bitter air felt liquid when he breathed.

Around him loomed the fragments of what must have been a city, now reduced to a few columns and crumbling walls held up by the lava which had flowed. The stones reared high in the unreal moonlight, seeming almost to move as the shadows and the drifting sand passed them. Ghost city. Ghost planet. He was the last life that stirred on its bleak surface.

But somewhere above that surface—

What was it, that descending hum high in the sky, sweeping closer out of stars and moon and wind? Minutes ago the needle on his gravitomagnetic detector had wavered down in the depths of the pyramid. He had hurried up and now stood looking and listening and feeling his heart

turn stiff.

No, no, no—not a Janyard ship, not now—it was the end of everything if they came.

Laird cursed with a hopeless fury. The wind caught his mouthings and blew them away with the scudding sand, buried them under the everlasting silence of the valley. His eyes traveled to his sneakboat. It was invisible against the great pyramid—he'd taken that much precaution, shoveling a low grave of sand over it—but, if they used metal detectors that was valueless. He was fast, yes, but almost unarmed; they could easily follow his trail down into the labyrinth and locate the vault.

Lord if he had led them here—if his planning and striving had only resulted in giving the enemy the weapon which would destroy Earth—

His hand closed about the butt of his blaster. Silly weapon, stupid popgun—what could he do?

Decision came. With a curse, he whirled and ran back into the pyramid.

His flash lit the endless downward passages with a dim bobbing radiance, and the shadows swept above and behind and marched beside, the shadows of a million years closing in to smother him. His boots slammed against the stone floor, *thud-thud-thud*—the echoes caught the rhythm and rolled it booming ahead of him. A primitive terror rose to drown his dismay; he was going down into the grave of a thousand millennia, the grave of the gods, and it took all the nerve he had to keep running and never look back. He didn't dare look back.

Down and down and down, past this winding tunnel, along this ramp, through this passageway into the guts of the planet. A man could get lost here. A man could wander in the cold and the dark and the echoes till he died. It had taken him weeks to find his way into the great vault, and only the clues given by Murchison's reports had made it possible at all. Now—

night. It was fifty feet high, that door. He fled past it like an ant and came into the pyramid storehouse.

His flash gleamed off metal, glass, substances he could not identify that had lain sealed against a million years till he came to wake the machines. What they were, he did not know. He had energized some of the units, and they had hummed and flickered, but he had not dared experiment. His idea had been to rig an antigrav unit which would enable him to haul the entire mass of it up to his boat. Once he was home, the scientists could take over. But now—

He skinned his teeth in a wolfish grin and switched on the big lamp he had installed. White light flooded the tomb, shining darkly back from the monstrous bulks of things he could not use, the wisdom and techniques of a race which had spanned the stars and moved planets and endured for fifty million years. Maybe he could puzzle out the use of something before the enemy came. Maybe he could wipe them out in one demoniac sweep—just like a stereofilm hero, jeered his mind—or maybe he could simply destroy it all, keep it from Janyard hands.

He should have provided against this. He should have rigged a bomb, to blow the whole pyramid to hell—

With an effort, he stopped the frantic racing of his mind and looked around. There were paintings on the walls, dim with age but still legible, pictographs, meant perhaps for the one who finally found this treasure. The men of New Egypt were shown, hardly distinguishable from humans—dark of skin and hair, keen of feature, tall and stately and robed in living light. He had paid special attention to one representation. It showed a series of actions, like an old time comic-strip—a man taking up a glasey object, fitting it over his head, throwing a small switch. He had been tempted to try it, but—gods, what would it do?

He found the helmet and slipped it gingerly over his skull. It might be some kind of last-ditch chance for him. The thing was cold and smooth and hard, it settled on his head with a slow massive-

HE BURST INTO a narrow antechamber. The door he had blasted open leaned drunkenly against a well of

ness that was strangely—*living*. He shuddered and turned back to the machines.

This thing now with the long coil-wrapped barrel—an energy projector of some sort? How did you activate it? Hell-fire, which was the muzzle end?

He heard the faint banging of feet, winding closer down the endless passageways. Gods, his mind groaned. They didn't waste any time, did they?

But they hadn't needed to . . . a metal detector would have located his boat, told them that he was in this pyramid rather than one of the dozen others scattered through the valley. And energy tracers would spot him down here . . .

He doused the light and crouched in darkness behind one of the machines. The blaster was heavy in his hand.

A voice hailed him from outside the door. "It's useless, Solman. Come out of there!"

He bit back a reply and lay waiting.

A woman's voice took up the refrain. It was a good voice, he thought irrelevantly, low and well modulated, but it had an iron ring to it. They were hard, these Janyards, even their women led troops and piloted ships and killed men.

"You may as well surrender, Solman. All you have done has been to accomplish our work for us. We suspected such an attempt might be made. Lacking the archeological records, we couldn't hope for much success ourselves, but since my force was stationed near this sun I had a boat lie in an orbit around the planet with detectors wide open. We trailed you down, and let you work, and now we are here to get what you have found."

"Go back," he bluffed desperately. "I planted a bomb. Go back or I'll set it off."

The laugh was hard with scorn. "Do you think we wouldn't know it if you had? You haven't even a spacesuit on. Come out with your hands up or we'll flood the vault with gas."

Laird's teeth flashed in a snarling grin. "All right," he shouted, only half aware of what he was saying. "All right, you asked for it!"

He threw the switch on his helmet.

IT WAS LIKE a burst of fire in his brain, a soundless roar of splintering darkness. He screamed, half crazy with the fury that poured into him, feeling the hideous thrumming along every nerve and sinew, feeling his muscles cave in and his body hit the floor. The shadows closed in, roaring and rolling, night and death and the wreck of the universe, and high above it all he heard—laughter.

He lay sprawled behind the machine, twitching and whimpering. They had heard him, out in the tunnels, and with slow caution they entered and stood over him and watched his spasms jerk toward stillness.

They were tall and well-formed, the Janyard rebels—Earth had sent her best out to colonize the Sagittarian worlds, three hundred years ago. But the long cruel struggle, conquering and building and adapting to planets that never were and never could be Earth, had changed them, hardened their metal and frozen something in their souls.

Ostensibly it was a quarrel over tariff and trade rights which had led to their revolt against the Empire; actually, it was a new culture yelling to life, a thing born of fire and loneliness and the great empty reaches between the stars, the savage rebellion of a mutant child. They stood impassively watching the body until it lay quiet. Then one of them stooped over and removed the shining glassy helmet.

"He must have taken it for something he could use against us," said the Janyard, turning the helmet in his hands; "but it wasn't adapted to his sort of life. The old dwellers here looked human, but I don't think it went any deeper than their skins."

The woman commander looked down with a certain pity. "He was a brave man," she said.

"Wait—he's still alive, ma'm—he's sitting up—"

Daryesh forced the shaking body to hands and knees. He felt its sickness, wretched and cold in throat and nerves and muscles, and he felt the roiling of fear and urgency in the brain. These were

enemies. There was death for a world and a civilization here. Most of all, he felt the horrible numbness of the nervous system, deaf and dumb and blind, cut off in its house of bone and peering out through five weak senses . . .

Vwyrdda, Vwyrdda, he was a prisoner in a brain without a telepathy transceiver lobe. He was a ghost reincarnated in a thing that was half a corpse!

Strong arms helped him to his feet. "That was a foolish thing to try," said the woman's cool voice.

Daryesh felt strength flowing back as the nervous and muscular and endocrine systems found a new balance, as his mind took over and fought down the gibbering madness which had been Laird. He drew a shuddering breath. Air in his nostrils after—how long? How long had he been dead?

His eyes focused on the woman. She was tall and handsome. Ruddy hair spilled from under a peaked cap, wide-set blue eyes regarded him frankly out of a face sculptured in clean lines and strong curves and fresh young coloring. For a moment he thought of Ilorna, and the old sickness rose—then he throttled it and looked again at the woman and smiled.

It was an insolent grin, and she stiffened angrily. "Who are you, Solman?" she asked.

The meaning was clear enough to Daryesh, who had his—host's—memory patterns and linguistic habits as well as those of Vwyrdda. He replied steadily, "Lieutenant John Laird of the Imperial Solar Navy, at your service. And your name?"

"You are exceeding yourself," she replied with frost in her voice. "But since I will wish to question you at length . . . I am Captain Joana Rostov of the Janyard Fleet. Conduct yourself accordingly."

Daryesh looked around him. This wasn't good. He hadn't the chance now to search Laird's memories in detail, but it was clear enough that this was a force of enemies. The rights and wrongs of a quarrel ages after the death of all that had been Vwyrdda meant nothing to him, but he had to learn more of the situation, and be free to act as he chose. Especially since Laird

would presently be reviving and start to resist.

The familiar sight of the machines was at once steady and unnerving. There were powers here which could smash planets! It looked barbaric, this successor culture, and in any event the decision as to the use of this leashed hell had to be his. His head lifted in unconscious arrogance. *His!* For he was the last man of Vwyrdda, and they had wrought the machines, and the heritage was his. He had to escape.

JOANA ROSTOV was looking at him with an odd blend of hard suspicion and half-frightened puzzlement. "There's something wrong about you, Lieutenant," she said. "You don't behave like a man whose project has just gone to smash. What was that helmet for?"

Daryesh shrugged. "Part of a control device," he said easily. "In my excitement I failed to adjust it properly. No matter. There are plenty of other machines here."

"What use to you?"

"Oh—all sorts of uses. For instance, that one over there is a nucleonic disintegrator, and this is a shield projector, and—"

"You're lying. You can't know any more about this than we do."

"Shall I prove it?"

"Certainly not. Come back from there!"

Coldly, Daryesh estimated distances. He had all the superb psychosomatic coordination of his race, the training evolved through millions of years, but the sub-cellular components would be lacking in this body. Still—he had to take the chance.

He launched himself against the Janyard who stood beside him. One hand chopped into the man's larynx, the other grabbed him by the tunic and threw him into the man beyond. In the same movement, Daryesh stepped over the falling bodies, picked up the machine rifle which one had dropped, and slammed over the switch of the magnetic shield projector with its long barrel.

Guns blazed in the dimness. Bullets exploded into molten spray as they hit that fantastic magnetic field. Daryesh, behind

it, raced through the door and out the tunnel.

They'd be after him in seconds, but this was a strong longlegged body and he was getting the feel of it. He ran easily, breathing in coordination with every movement, conserving his strength. He couldn't master control of the involuntary functions yet, the nervous system was too different, but he could last for a long while at this pace.

He ducked into a remembered side passage. A rifle spewed a rain of slugs after him as someone came through the magnetic field. He chuckled in the dark. Unless they had mapped every labyrinthine twist and turn of the tunnels, or had life-energy detectors, they'd never dare trail him. They'd get lost and wander in here till they starved.

Still, that woman had a brain. She'd guess he was making for the surface and the boats, and try to cut him off. It would be a near thing. He settled down to running.

It was long and black and hollow here, cold with age. The air was dry and dusty, little moisture could be left on Vwyrdda. How long has it been? How long has it been?

JOHNSON Laird stirred back toward consciousness, stunned neurones lapsing into familiar pathways of synapse, the pattern which was personality fighting to restore itself. Daryesh stumbled as the groping mind flashed a random command to his muscles, cursed, and willed the other self back to blankness. Hold on, Daryesh, hold on, a few minutes only—

He burst out of a small side entrance and stood in the tumbled desolation of the valley. The keen tenuous air raked his sobbing lungs as he looked wildly around at sand and stone and the alien stars. New constellations—Gods, it had been a long time! The moon was larger than he remembered, flooding the dead landscape with a frosty argence. It must have spiraled close in all those uncounted ages.

The boat! Hellblaze, where was the boat?

He saw the Janyard ship not far away,

a long lean torpedo resting on the dunes, but it would be guarded—no use trying to steal it. Where was this Laird's vessel, then?

Tumbling through a confusion of alien memories, he recalled burying it on the west side . . . No, it wasn't he who had done that but Laird. Damnation, he had to work fast. He plunged around the monstrous eroded shape of the pyramid, found the long mound, saw the moongleam where the wind had blown sand off the metal. What a clumsy pup this Laird was.

He shoveled the sand away from the airlock, scooping with his hands, the breath raw in throat and lungs. Any second now they'd be on him, any instant, and now that they really believed he understood the machines—

The lock shone dully before him, cold under his hands. He spun the outer dog, swearing with a frantic emotion foreign to old Vwyrdda, but that was the habit of his host, untrained psychosomatically, unevolved—There they came!

Scooping up the stolen rifle, Daryesh fired a chattering burst at the group that swarmed around the edge of the pyramid. They tumbled like jointed dolls, screaming in the death-white moonlight. Bullets howled around him and ricocheted off the boat-hull.

He got the lock open as they retreated for another charge. For an instant his teeth flashed under the moon, the cold grin of Daryesh the warrior who had ruled a thousand suns in his day and led the fleets of Vwyrdda.

"Farewell, my lovelies," he murmured, and the remembered syllables of the old planet were soft on his tongue.

Slamming the lock behind him, he ran to the control room, letting John Laird's almost unconscious habits carry him along. He got off to a clumsy start—but then he was climbing for the sky, free and away—

A fist slammed into his back, tossed him in his pilot chair to the screaming roar of sundered metal. Gods, O gods, the Janyards had fired a heavy ship's gun, they'd scored a direct hit on his engines and the boat was whistling groundward again.

Grimly, he estimated that the initial

impetus had given him a good trajectory, that he'd come down in the hills about a hundred miles north of the valley. But then he'd have to run for it, they'd be after him like beasts of prey in their ship --and John Laird would not be denied, muscles were twitching and sinews tightening and throat mumbling insanity as the resurgent personality fought to regain itself. That was one battle he'd have to have out soon!

Well--mentally, Daryesh shrugged. At worst, he could surrender to the Janyards, make common cause with them. It really didn't matter who won this idiotic little war. He had other things to do.

NIGHTMARE. John Laird crouched in a wind-worn cave and looked out over hills lit by icy moonlight. Through a stranger's eyes, he saw the Janyard ship landing near the down-glided wreck of his boat, saw the glitter of steel as they poured out and started hunting. Hunting him.

Or was it him any longer, was he more than a prisoner in his own skull? He thought back to memories that were not his, memories of himself thinking thoughts that were not his own, himself escaping from the enemy while he, Laird, whirled in a black abyss of half-conscious madness. Beyond that, he recalled his own life, and he recalled another life which had endured a thousand years before it died. He looked out on the wilderness of rock and sand and blowing dust, and remembered it as it had been, green and fair, and remembered that he was Daryesh of Tollogh, who had ruled over whole planetary systems in the Empire of Vwyrdda. And at the same time he was John Laird of Earth, and two streams of thought flowed through the brain, listening to each other, shouting at each other in the darkness of his skull.

A million years! Horror and loneliness and a wrenching sorrow were in the mind of Daryesh as he looked upon the ruin of Vwyrdda. A million years ago!

Who are you? cried Laird. What have you done to me? And even as he asked, memories which were his own now rose to

answer him.

It had been the Erai who rebelled, the Erai whose fathers came from Vwyrdda the fair but who had been strangely altered by centuries of environment. They had revolted against the static rule of the Immortals, and in a century of warfare they had overrun half the Empire and rallied its populations under them. And the Immortals had unleashed their most terrible powers, the sun-smashing ultimate weapons which had lain forbidden in the vaults of Vwyrdda for ten million years. Only--the Erai had known about it. And they had had the weapons too.

In the end, Vwyrdda went under, her fleets broken and her armies reeling in retreat over ten thousand scorched planets. The triumphant Erai had roared in to make an end of the mother world, and nothing in all the mighty Imperial arsenals could stop them now.

Theirs was an unstable culture, it could not endure as that of Vwyrdda had. In ten thousand years or so, they would be gone, and the Galaxy would not have even a memory of that which had been. Which was small help to us, thought Laird grimly, and realized with an icy shock that it had been the thought of Daryesh.

The Vwyrddan's mental tone was, suddenly, almost conversational, and Laird realized what an immensity of trained effort it must have taken to overcome that loneliness of a million years. "See here, Laird, we are apparently doomed to occupy the same body till one of us gets rid of the other, and it is a body which the Janyards seem to want. Rather than fight each other, which would leave the body helpless, we'd better cooperate."

"But--Lord, man! What do you think I am? Do you think I want a vampire like you up there in my brain?"

The answer was fierce and cold. "What of me, Laird? I, who was Daryesh of Tollogh, lord of a thousand suns and lover of Ilorna the Fair, immortalized noble of the greatest empire the universe has ever seen--I am now trapped in the half-evolved body of a hunted alien, a million years after the death of all which mattered. Better be glad I'm here, Laird. I can handle

those weapons, you know."

The eyes looked out over the bleak windy hillscape, and the double mind watched distance-dwarfed forms clambering in the rocks, searching for a trail. "A hell of a lot of good that does us now," said Laird. "Besides, I can hear you thinking, you know, and I can remember your own past thoughts. Sol or Janya, it's the same to you. How do I know you'll play ball with me?"

The answer was instant, but dark with an unpleasant laughter. "Why—read my mind, Laird! It's your mind too, isn't it?" Then, more soberly: "Apparently history is repeating itself in the revolt of the barbarians against the mother planet, though on a smaller scale and with a less developed science. I do not expect the result to be any happier for civilization than before. So perhaps I may take a more effective hand than I did before."

It was ghostly, lying here in the wind-grieved remnants of a world, watching the hunters move through a bitter haze of moonlight, and having thoughts which were not one's own, thoughts over which there was no control. Laird clenched his fists, fighting for stability.

"That's better," said Daryesh's sardonic mind. "But relax. Breathe slowly and deeply, concentrate only on the breathing for a while—and then search my mind which is also yours."

"Shut up! Shut up!"

"I am afraid that is impossible. We're in the same brain, you know, and we'll have to get used to each other's streams of consciousness. Relax, man, lie still; think over the thing which has happened to you and know it for the wonder it is."

Man, they say, is a time-binding animal. But only the mighty will and yearning of Vwyrdda had ever leaped across the borders of death itself, waited a million years that that which was a world might not die out of all history.

What is the personality? It is not a thing, discrete and material, it is a pattern and a process. The body starts with a certain genetic inheritance and meets all the manifold complexities of environment. The whole organism is a set of reactions

between the two. The primarily mental component, sometimes called the ego, is not separable from the body but can in some ways be studied apart.

The scientists had found a way to save something of that which was Daryesh. While the enemy was blazing and thundering at the gates of Vwyrdda, while all the planet waited for the last battle and the ultimate night, quiet men in laboratories had perfected the molecular scanner so that the pattern of synapses which made up all memory, habit, reflex, instinct, the continuity of the ego, could be recorded upon the electronic structure of certain crystals. They took the pattern of Daryesh and of none other, for only he of the remaining Immortals was willing. Who else would want a pattern to be repeated, ages after he himself was dead, ages after all the world and all history and meaning were lost? But Daryesh had always been reckless, and Ilorna was dead, and he didn't care much for what happened.

Ilorna, Ilorna! Laird saw the unforgettable image rise in his memory, golden-eyed and laughing, the long dark hair flowing around the lovely suppleness of her. He remembered the sound of her voice and the sweetness of her lips, and he loved her. A million years, and she was dust blowing on the night wind, and he loved her with that part of him which was Daryesh and with more than a little of John Laird . . . O Ilorna . . .

And Daryesh the man had gone to die with his planet, but the crystal pattern which reproduced the ego of Daryesh lay in the vault they had made, surrounded by all the mightiest works of Vwyrdda. Sooner or later, sometime in the infinite future of the universe, someone would come; someone or something would put the helmet on his head and activate it. And the pattern would be reproduced on the neurones, the mind of Daryesh would live again, and he would speak for dead Vwyrdda and seek to renew the tradition of fifty million years. It would be the will of Vwyrdda, reaching across time—But Vwyrdda is *dead*, thought Laird frantically. Vwyrdda is gone—this is a new history—you've got no business telling us

what to do!

The reply was cold with arrogance. "I shall do as I see fit. Meanwhile, I advise that you lie passive and do not attempt to interfere with me."

"Cram it, Daryesh!" Laird's mouth drew back in a snarl. "I won't be dictated to by anyone, let alone a ghost."

Persuasively, the answer came, "At the moment, neither of us has much choice. We are hunted, and if they have energy trackers—yes, I see they do—they'll find us by this body's thermal radiation alone. Best we surrender peaceably. Once aboard the ship, loaded with all the might of Vwyrdda, our chance should come."

Laird lay quietly, watching the hunters move closer, and the sense of defeat came down on him like a falling world. What else could he do? What other chance was there?

"All right," he said at last, audibly. "All right. But I'll be watching your every thought, understand? I don't think you can stop me from committing suicide if I must."

"I think I can. But opposing signals to the body will only neutralize each other, leave it helplessly fighting itself. Relax, Laird, lie back and let me handle this. I am Daryesh the warrior, and I have come through harder battles than this."

They rose and began walking down the hillside with arms lifted. Daryesh's thought ran on, "Besides—that's a nice-looking wench in command. It could be interesting!"

His laughter rang out under the moon, and it was not the laughter of a human being.

"I CAN'T understand you, John Laird," said Joana.

"Sometimes," replied Daryesh lightly, "I don't understand myself very well—or you, my dear."

She stiffened a little. "That will do. Lieutenant. Remember your position here."

"Oh, the devil with our ranks and countries. Let's be live entities for a change."

Her glance was quizzical. "That's an

odd way for a Solman to phrase it."

Mentally, Daryesh swore. Damn this body, anyway! The strength, the fineness of coordination and perception, half the senses he had known, were missing from it. The gross brain structure couldn't hold the reasoning powers he had once had. His thinking was dull and sluggish. He made blunders the old Daryesh would never have committed. And this young woman was quick to see them, and he was a prisoner of John Laird's deadly enemies, and the mind of Laird himself was tangled in thought and will and memory, ready to fight him if he gave the least sign of—

The Solarian's ego chuckled nastily. Easy, Daryesh, easy!

Shut up! his mind snapped back, and he knew drearily that his own trained nervous system would not have been guilty of such a childishly emotional response.

"I may as well tell you the truth, Captain Rostov," he said aloud. "I am not Laird at all. Not any more."

She made no response, merely drooped the lids over her eyes and leaned back in her chair. He noticed abstractedly how long her lashes were—or was that Laird's appreciative mind, unhindered by too much remembrance of Ilorna?

They sat alone, the two of them, in her small cabin aboard the Janyard cruiser. A guard stood outside the door, but it was closed. From time to time they would hear a dull thump or clang as the heavy machines of Vwyrdda were dragged aboard—otherwise they might have been the last two alive on the scarred old planet.

The room was austere furnished, but there were touches of the feminine here and there—curtains, a small pot of flowers, a formal dress hung in a half-open closet. And the woman who sat across the desk from him was very beautiful, with the loosened ruddy hair streaming to her shoulders and the brilliant eyes never wavering from his. But one slender hand rested on a pistol.

She had told him frankly, "I want to talk privately with you. There is something I don't understand . . . but I'll be ready to shoot at the first suspicion of a false move. And even if you should some-

how overpower me, I'd be no good as a hostage. We're Janyards here, and the ship is more than the life of any one of us."

Now she waited for him to go on talking.

He took a cigarette from the box on her desk—Laird's habits again—and lit it and took a slow drag of smoke into his lungs. *All right, Daryesh, go ahead. I suppose your idea is the best, if anything can be made to work at all. But I'm listening, remember.*

"I am all that is left of this planet," he said tonelessly. "This is the ego of Daryesh of Tollogh, Immortal of Vwyrdda, and in one sense I died a million years ago."

She remained quiet, but he saw how her hands clenched and he heard the sharp small hiss of breath sucked between the teeth.

Briefly, then, he explained how his mental pattern had been preserved, and how it had entered the brain of John Laird.

"You don't expect me to believe that story," she said contemptuously.

"Do you have a lie detector aboard?"

"I have one in this cabin, and I can operate it myself." She got up and fetched the machine from a cabinet. He watched her, noticing the grace of her movements. You died long ago, Ilorna—you died and the universe will never know another like you. But I go on, and she reminds me somehow of you.

IT WAS a small black thing that hummed and glowed on the desk between them. He put the metal cap on his head, and took the knobs in his hands, and waited while she adjusted the controls. From Laird's memories, he recalled the principle of the thing, the measurement of activity in separate brain centers, the precise detection of the slight extra energy needed in the higher cerebral cortex to invent a falsehood.

"I have to calibrate," she said. "Make up something I know to be a lie."

"New Egypt has rings," he smiled, "which are made of Limburger cheese.

However, the main body of the planet is a delicious Camembert—"

"That will do. Now repeat your previous statements."

Relax, Laird, damn it—blank yourself! I can't control this thing with you interfering.

He told his story again in a firm voice, and meanwhile he was working within the brain of Laird, getting the feel of it, applying the lessons of nerve control which had been part of his Vwyrddan education. It should certainly be possible to fool a simple electronic gadget, to heighten activity in all centers to such an extent that the added effort of his creative cells could not be spotted.

He went on without hesitation, wondering if the flickering needles would betray him and if her gun would spit death into his heart in the next moment: "Naturally, Laird's personality was completely lost, its fixed patterns obliterated by the superimposition of my own. I have his memories, but otherwise I am Daryesh of Vwyrdda, at your service."

She bit her lip. "What service! You shot four of my men."

"Consider my situation, woman. I came into instantaneous existence. I remember sitting in the laboratory under the scanner, a slight dizziness, and then immediately I was in an alien body. Its nervous system was stunned by the shock of my entry, I couldn't think clearly. All I had to go on was Laird's remembered conviction that these were deadly foes surrounding me, murderous creatures bent on killing me and wiping out my planet. I acted half-instinctively. Also, I wanted, in my own personality, to be a free agent, to get away and think this out for myself. So I did. I regret the death of your men, but I think they will be amply compensated for."

"H'm—you surrendered when we all but had you anyway."

"Yes, of course, but I had about decided to do so in all events." Her eyes never lifted from the dials that wavered life or death. "I was, after all, in your territory, with little or no hope of getting clear, and you were the winning side of this war, which meant nothing to me

emotionally. Insofar as I have any convictions in this matter, it is that the human race will best be served by a janyard victory. History has shown that when the frontier cultures—which the old empire calls barbaric but which are actually new and better adapted civilizations—when they win out over the older and more conservative nations, the result is a synthesis and a period of unusual achievement.”

He saw her visibly relaxing, and inwardly he smiled. It was so easy, so easy. They were such children in this later age. All he had to do was hand her a smooth lie which fitted in with the propaganda that had been her mental environment from birth, and she could not seriously think of him as an enemy.

The blue gaze lifted to his, and the lips were parted. “You will help us?” she whispered.

Daryesh nodded. “I know the principles and construction and use of those engines, and in truth there is in them the force that molds planets. Your scientists would never work out the half of all that there is to be found. I will show you the proper operation of them all.” He shrugged. “Naturally, I will expect commensurate rewards. But even altruistically speaking, this is the best thing I can do. Those energies should remain under the direction of one who understands them, and not be misused in ignorance. That could lead to unimaginable catastrophes.”

Suddenly she picked up her gun and shoved it back into its holster. She stood up, smiling, and held out her hand.

He shook it vigorously, and then bent over and kissed it. When he looked up, she stood uncertain, half afraid and half glad.

It's not fair! protested Laird. The poor girl has never known anything of this sort. She's never heard of coquetry. To her love isn't a game, it's something mysterious and earnest and decent—

I told you to shut up, answered Daryesh coldly. Look, man, even if we do have an official safe-conduct, this is still a ship full of watchful hostility. We have to consolidate our position by every means at hand. Now relax and enjoy this.

HE WALKED around the desk and took her hands again. “You know,” he said, and the crooked smile on his mouth reminded him that this was more than half a truth, “you make me think of the woman I loved, a million years ago on Vwyrdda.”

She shrank back a little. “I can't get over it,” she whispered. “You—you're old, and you don't belong to this cycle of time at all, and what you must think and know makes me feel like a child—Daryesh, it frightens me.”

“Don't let it, Joana,” he said gently. “My mind is young, and very lonely.” He put a wistfulness in his voice. “Joana, I need someone to talk to. You can't imagine what it is to wake up a million years after all your world is dead, more alone than—oh, let me come in once in awhile and talk to you, as one friend to another. Let's forget time and death and loneliness. I need someone like you.”

She lowered her eyes, and said with a stubborn honesty, “I think that would be good too, Daryesh. A ship's captain doesn't have friends, you know. They put me in this service because I had the aptitude, and that's really all I've ever had. Oh, comets!” She forced a laugh. “To space with all that self-pity. Certainly you may come in whenever you like. I hope it'll be often.”

They talked for quite a while longer, and when he kissed her goodnight it was the most natural thing in the universe. He walked to his bunk—transferred from the brig to a tiny unused compartment—with his mind in pleasant haze.

Lying in the dark, he began the silent argument with Laird anew. “Now what?” demanded the Solarian.

“We play it slow and easy,” said Daryesh patiently—as if the fool couldn't read it directly in their common brain. “We watch our chance, but don't act for a while yet. Under the pretext of rigging the energy projectors for action, we'll arrange a setup which can destroy the ship at the flick of a switch. They won't know it. They haven't an inkling about subspatial flows. Then, when an opportunity to escape offers itself, we throw that switch

and get away and try to return to Sol. With my knowledge of Vwyrddan science, we can turn the tide of the war. It's risky—sure—but it's the only chance I see. And for Heaven's sake let me handle matters. You're supposed to be dead."

"And what happens when we finally settle this business? How can I get rid of you?"

"Frankly, I don't see any way to do it. Our patterns have become too entangled. The scanners necessarily work on the whole nervous system. We'll just have to learn to live together." Persuasively: "It will be to your own advantage. Think, man! We can do as we choose with Sol. With the Galaxy. And I'll set up a life-tank and make us a new body to which we'll transfer the pattern, a body with all the intelligence and abilities of a Vwyrddan, and I'll immortalize it. Man, you'll never die!"

It wasn't too happy a prospect, thought Laird skeptically. His own chances of dominating that combination were small. In time, his own personality might be completely absorbed by Daryesh's greater one.

Of course—a psychiatrist—narcosis, hypnosis—

"No, you don't!" said Daryesh grimly. "I'm just as fond of my own individuality as you are."

The mouth which was theirs twisted wryly in the dark. "Guess we'll just have to learn to love each other," thought Laird.

The body dropped into slumber. Presently Laird's cells were asleep, his personality faded into a shadowland of dreams. Daryesh remained awake a while longer. Sleep—waste of time—the Immortals had never been plagued by fatigue—

He chuckled to himself. What a web of lies and counterlies he had woven. If Joana and Laird both knew—

THE MIND is an intricate thing. It can conceal facts from itself, make itself forget that which is painful to remember, persuade its own higher components of whatever the subconscious deems right. Rationalization, schizophrenia, autohypnosis, they are but pale indications of the

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self-deception which the brain practices. And the training of the Immortals included full neural coordination; they could consciously utilize the powers latent in themselves. They could by an act of conscious will stop the heart, or block off pain, or split their own personalities.

Daryesh had known his ego would be fighting whatever host it found, and he had made preparations before he was scanned. Only a part of his mind was in full contact with Laird's. Another section, split off from the main stream of consciousness by deliberate and controlled schizophrenia, was thinking its own thoughts and making its own plans. Self-hypnotized, he automatically reunited his ego at such times as Laird was not aware, otherwise there was only subconscious contact. In effect a private compartment of his mind, inaccessible to the Solarian, was making its own plans.

That destructive switch would have to be installed to satisfy Laird's waking personality, he thought. But it would never be thrown. For he had been telling Joana that much of the truth—his own advantage lay with the Janyards, and he meant to see them through to final victory.

It would be simple enough to get rid of Laird temporarily. Persuade him that for some reason it was advisable to get dead drunk. Daryesh's more controlled ego would remain conscious after Laird's had passed out. Then he could make all arrangements with Joana, who by that time should be ready to do whatever he wanted.

Psychiatry—yes, Laird's brief idea had been the right one. The methods of treating schizophrenia could, with some modifications, be applied to suppressing Daryesh's extra personality. He'd blank out that Solarian . . . permanently.

And after that would come his undying new body, and centuries and millennia in which he could do what he wanted with this young civilization.

The demon exorcising the man—He grinned drowsily. Presently he slept.

THE SHIP drove through a night of stars and distance. Time was meaningless, was the position of the hands on

a clock, was the succession of sleeps and meals, was the slow shift in the constellations as they gulped the light-years.

On and on, the mighty drone of the second-order drive filling their bones and their days, the round of work and food and sleep and Joana. Laird wondered if it would ever end. He wondered if he might not be the Flying Dutchman, outward bound for eternity, locked in his own skull with the thing that had possessed him. At such times the only comfort was in Joana's arms. He drew of the wild young strength of her, and he and Daryesh were one. But afterward—

We're going to join the Grand Fleet. You heard her, Daryesh. She's making a triumphal pilgrimage to the gathered powers of Janya, bringing the invincible weapons of Vwyrdda to her admiral.

Why not? She's young and ambitious, she wants glory as much as you do. What of it?

We have to escape before she gets there. We have to steal a lifeboat and destroy this ship and all in it soon.

All in it? Joana Rostov, too?

Damn it, we'll kidnap her or something. You know I'm in love with the girl, you devil. But it's a matter of all Earth. This one cruiser has enough stuff in it now to wreck a planet. I have parents, brothers, friends—a civilization. We've got to act!

All right, all right, Laird. But take it easy. We have to get the energy devices installed first. We'll have to give them enough of a demonstration to allay their suspicions. Joana's the only one aboard here who trusts us. None of her officers do.

The body and the double mind labored as the slow days passed, directing Janyard technicians who could not understand what it was they built. Laird, drawing on Daryesh's memories, knew what a giant slept in those coils and tubes and invisible energy-fields. Here were forces to trigger the great creative powers of the universe and turn them to destruction—distorted space-time, atoms dissolving into pure energy, vibrations to upset the stability of force-fields which maintained order in the cosmos. Laird remembered the ruin of

Vwyrdda, and shuddered.

They got a projector mounted and operating, and Daryesh suggested that the cruiser halt somewhere that he could prove his words. They picked a barren planet in an uninhabited system and lay in an orbit fifty thousand miles out. In an hour Daryesh had turned the facing hemisphere into a sea of lava.

"If the dis-fields were going," he said absent-mindedly, "I'd pull the planet into chunks for you."

Laird saw the pale taut faces around him. Sweat was shining on foreheads, and a couple of men looked sick. Joana forgot her position enough to come shivering into his arms.

But the visage she lifted in a minute was exultant and eager, with the thoughtless cruelty of a swooping hawk. "There's an end of Earth, gentlemen!"

"Nothing they have can stop us," murmured her exec dazedly. "Why, this one ship, protected by one of those spacewarp screens you spoke of, sir—this one little ship could sail in and lay the Solar System waste."

DARYESH NODDED. It was entirely possible. Not much energy was required, since the generators of Vwyrdda served only as catalysts releasing fantastically greater forces. And Sol had none of the defensive science which had enabled his world to hold out for a while. Yes, it could be done.

He stiffened with the sudden furious thought of Laird: That's it, Daryesh! That's the answer.

The thought-stream was his own too, flowing through the same brain, and indeed it was simple. They could have the whole ship armed and armored beyond the touch of Janya. And since none of the technicians aboard understood the machines, and since they were now wholly trusted, they could install robotcontrols without anyone's knowing.

Then—the massed Grand Fleet of Janya—a flick of the main switch—man-killing energies would flood the cruiser's interior, and only corpses would remain aboard. Dead men and the robots that would open

fire on the Fleet. This one ship could ruin all the barbarian hopes in a few bursts of incredible flame. And the robots could then be set to destroy her as well, lest by some chance the remaining Janyards manage to board her.

And we—we can escape in the initial confusion, Daryesh. We can give orders to the robot to spare the captain's gig, and we can get Joana aboard and head for Sol! There'll be no one left to pursue!

Slowly, the Vwyrddan's thought made reply: A good plan. Yes, a bold stroke. We'll do it!

"What's the matter, Daryesh?" Joana's voice was suddenly anxious. "You look—"

"Just thinking, that's all. Never think, Captain Rostov. Bad for the brain."

Later, as he kissed her, Laird felt ill at thought of the treachery he planned. Her friends, her world, her cause—wiped out in a single shattering blow, and he would have struck it. He wondered if she would speak to him ever again, once it was over.

Daryesh, the heartless devil, seemed only to find a sardonic amusement in the situation.

And later, when Laird slept, Daryesh thought that the young man's scheme was good. Certainly he'd fall in with it. It would keep Laird busy till they were at the Grand Fleet rendezvous. And after that it would be too late. The Janyard victory would be sealed. All he, Daryesh, had to do when the time came was keep away from that master switch. If Laird tried to reach it their opposed wills would only result in nullity—which was victory for Janya.

He liked this new civilization. It had a freshness, a vigor and hopefulness which he could not find in Laird's memories of Earth. It had a tough-minded purposefulness that would get it far. And being young and fluid, it would be amenable to such pressures of psychology and force as he chose to apply.

Vwyrdda, his mind whispered. Vwyrdda, we'll make them over in your image. You'll live again!

auxiliaries lay marshaled at a dim red dwarf of a sun, massed together and spinning in the same mighty orbit. Against the incandescent whiteness of stars and the blackness of the old deeps, armored flanks gleamed like flame as far as eyes could see, rank after rank, tier upon tier, of titanic sharks swimming through space—guns and armor and torpedoes and bombs and men to smash a planet and end a civilization. The sight was too big, imagination could not make the leap, and the human mind had only a dazed impression of vastness beyond vision.

This was the great spearhead of Janya, a shining lance poised to drive through Sol's thin defense lines and roar out of the sky to rain hell on the seat of empire. They can't really be human any more, thought Laird sickly. Space and strangeness have changed them too much. No human being could think of destroying Man's home. Then, fiercely: All right Daryesh. This is our chance!

Not yet, Laird. Wait a while. Wait till we have a legitimate excuse for leaving the ship.

Well—come up to the control room with me. I want to stay near that switch. Lord, Lord, everything that is Man and me depends on us now!

Daryesh agreed with a certain reluctance that faintly puzzled the part of his mind open to Laird. The other half, crouched deep in his subconscious, knew the reason: It was waiting the posthypnotic signal, the key event which would trigger its emergence into the higher brain-triggers.

The ship bore a tangled and unfinished look. All its conventional armament had been ripped out and the machines of Vwyrdda installed in its place. A robot brain, half-alive in its complexity, was gunner and pilot and ruling intelligence of the vessel now, and only the double mind of one man knew what orders had really been given it. *When the main switch is thrown, you will flood the ship with ten units of disrupting radiation. Then, when the captain's gig is well away, you will destroy this fleet, sparing only that one boat. When no more ships in operative condition are in range, you will activate*

GRAND FLEET!

A million capital ships and their

the disintegrators and dissolve this whole vessel and all its contents to basic energy.

With a certain morbid fascination, Laird looked at that switch. An ordinary double-throw knife type—Lord of space, could it be possible, was it logical that all history should depend on the angle it made with the control panel? He pulled his eyes away, stared out at the swarming ships and the greater host of the stars, lit a cigaret with shaking hands, paced and sweated and waited.

Joana came to him, a couple of crewmen marching solemnly behind. Her eyes shone and her cheeks were flushed and the turret light was like molten copper in her hair. No woman, thought Laird, had ever been so lovely, and he was going to destroy that to which she had given her life.

"Daryesh!" Laughter danced in her voice. "Daryesh, the high admiral wants to see us in his flagship. He'll probably ask for a demonstration, and then I think the fleet will start for Sol at once with us in the van. Daryesh—oh, Daryesh, the war is almost over!"

Now! blazed the thought of Laird, and his hand reached for the main switch. Now—easily, causally, with a remark about letting the generators warm up—and then go with her, overpower those guardsmen in their surprise and head for home!

And Daryesh's mind reunited itself at that signal, and the hand froze . . .

No!

What? But—

The memory of the suppressed half of Daryesh's mind was open to Laird, and the triumph of the whole of it, and Laird knew that his defeat was here.

SÔ SIMPLE, so cruelly simple—Daryesh could stop him, lock the body in a conflict of wills, and that would be enough. For while Laird slept, while Daryesh's own major ego was unconscious, the trained subconscious of the Vwyrddan had-taken over. It had written, in its self-created somnambulism, a letter to Joana explaining the whole truth, and had put it where it would easily be found once they started looking through his effects in search of an explanation for his paralysis.

And the letter directed, among other things, that Daryesh's body should be kept under restraint until certain specified methods known to Vwyrddan psychiatry—drugs, electric waves, hypnosis—had been applied to eradicate the Laird half of his mind.

Janyard victory was near.

"Daryesh!" Joana's voice seemed to come from immensely far away; her face swam in a haze and a roar of fainting consciousness. "Daryesh, what's the matter? Oh, my dear, what's wrong?"

Grimly, the Vwyrddan thought: Give up, Laird. Surrender to me, and you can keep your ego. I'll destroy that letter. See, my whole mind is open to you now—you can see that I mean it honestly this time. I'd rather avoid treatment if possible, and I do owe you something. But surrender now, or be wiped out of your own brain.

Defeat and ruin—and nothing but slow distorting death as reward for resistance. Laird's will caved in, his mind too chaotic for clear thought. Only one dull impulse came: I give up. You win, Daryesh.

The collapsed body picked itself off the floor. Joana was bending anxiously over him. "Oh, what is it, what's wrong?"

Daryesh collected himself and smiled shakily. "Excitement will do this to me, now and then. I haven't fully mastered this alien nervous system yet. I'm all right now. Let's go."

Laird's hand reached out and pulled the switch over.

Daryesh shouted, an animal roar from the throat, and tried to recover it, and the body toppled again in a stasis of locked wills.

It was like a deliverance from hell, and still it was but the inevitable logic of events, as Laird's own self reunited. Half of him still shaking with defeat, half realizing its own victory, he thought savagely:

None of them noticed me do that. They were paying too much attention to my face. Or if they did, we've proved to them before that it's only a harmless regulating switch. And—the lethal radiations are already flooding us! If you don't

cooperate now, Daryesh, I'll hold us here till we're both dead!

So simple, so simple. Because, sharing Daryesh's memory, Laird had shared his knowledge of self-deception techniques. He had anticipated, with the buried half of his mind, that the Vwyrddan might pull some such trick, and had installed a posthypnotic command of his own. In a situation like this, when everything looked hopeless, his conscious mind was to surrender, and then his subconscious would order that the switch be thrown.

Cooperate, Daryesh! You're as fond of living as I. Cooperate, and let's get the hell out of here!

Grudgingly, wrly: You win, Laird.

The body rose again, and leaned on Joana's arm, and made its slow way toward the boat blisters. The undetectable rays of death poured through them, piling up their cumulative effects. In three minutes, a nervous system would be ruined.

Too slow, too slow. "Come on, Joana. Run!"

"Why—" She stopped, and a hard suspicion came into the faces of the two men behind her. "Daryesh—what do you mean? What's come over you?"

"Ma'm . . ." One of the crewmen stepped forward. "Ma'm, I wonder . . . I saw him pull down the main switch. And now he's in a hurry to leave the ship. And none of us really know how all that machinery ticks."

Laird pulled the gun out of Joana's holster and shot him. The other gasped, reaching for his own side arm, and Laird's weapon blazed again.

His fist leaped out, striking Joana on the angle of the jaw, and she sagged. He caught her up and started to run.

A pair of crewmen stood in the corridor leading to the boats. "What's the matter, sir?" one asked.

"Collapsed—radiation from the machines—got to get her to a hospital ship," gasped Daryesh.

They stood aside, wonderingly, and he spun the dogs of the blister valve and stepped into the gig. "Shall we come, sir?" asked one of the men.

"No!" Laird felt a little dizzy. The

radiation was streaming through him, and death was coming with giant strides. "No—" He smashed a fist into the insistent face, slammed the valve back, and vaulted to the pilot's chair.

The engines hummed, warming up. Fists and feet battered on the valve. The sickness made him retch.

O Joana, if this kills you—

He threw the main-drive switch. Acceleration jammed him back as the gig leaped free.

Staring out the ports, he saw fire blossom in space as the great guns of Vwyrdda opened up.

MY GLASS was empty. I signalled for a refill and sat wondering just how much of the yarn one could believe.

"I've read the histories," I said slowly. "I do know that some mysterious catastrophe annihilated the massed fleet of Janya and turned the balance of the war. Sol speared in and won inside of a year. And you mean that you did it?"

"In a way. Or Daryesh did. We were acting as one personality, you know. He was a thoroughgoing realist, and the moment he saw his defeat he switched wholeheartedly to the other side."

"But—Lord, man! Why've we never heard anything about this? You mean you never told anyone, never rebuilt any of those machines, never did anything?"

Laird's dark, worn face twisted in a bleak smile. "Certainly. This civilization isn't ready for such things. Even Vwyrdda wasn't, and it'll take us millions of years to reach their stage. Besides, it was part of the bargain."

"Bargain?"

"Just as certainly. Daryesh and I still had to live together, you know. Life under suspicion of mutual trickery, never trusting your own brain, would have been intolerable. We reached an agreement during that long voyage back to Sol, and used Vwyrddan methods of autohypnosis to assure that it could not be broken."

He looked somberly out at the lunar night. "That's why I said the genie in the bottle killed me. Inevitably, the two personalities merged, became one. And

that one was, of course, mostly Daryesh, with overtones of Laird.

"Oh, it isn't so horrible. We retain the memories of our separate existences, and the continuity which is the most basic attribute of the ego. In fact, Laird's life was so limited, so blind to all the possibilities and wonder of the universe, that I don't regret him very often. Once in a while I still get nostalgic moments and have to talk to a human. But I always pick one who won't know whether or not to believe me, and won't be able to do much of anything about it if he should."

"And why did you go into Survey?" I asked, very softly.

"I want to get a good look at the universe before the change. Daryesh wants to orient himself, gather enough data for a sound basis of decision. When we—I— switch over to the new immortal body, there'll be work to do, a

galaxy to remake in a newer and better pattern by Vwyrddan standards! It'll take millennia, but we've got all time before us. Or I do—what do I mean, anyway?" He ran a hand through his gray-streaked hair.

"But Laird's part of the bargain was that there should be as nearly normal a human life as possible until this body gets inconveniently old. So—" He shrugged. "So that's how it worked out."

We sat for a while longer, saying little, and then he got up. "Excuse me," he said. "There's my wife. Thanks for the talk."

I saw him walk over to greet a tall, handsome red-haired woman. His voice drifted back: "Hello, Joana—"

They walked out of the room together in perfectly ordinary and human fashion.

I wonder what history has in store for us.

(Continued from page 3)

with the bandage for my eyes away. I will take this between the eyes.

The firing squad, twelve privates led by a lieutenant, line up twenty-six feet away. The lieutenant screams *present arms!* Right then I confuse them. I bellow FIRE! The rifles go off as one. Now, a flock of pigeons were flying over at the time. The bullets missed, the pigeons didn't, and there was much confusion as I went over the wall. I can take it in the neck, too. . . .

First: Ed Sigler, the boy with the same racial and political ideas I have.

Second: Ramon van Rensburg. Anybody that writes that far away from the states. . . .

Third: J. W. Peake and that kid has it! Imagine, his mother tears the covers off of his PLANETS. What would happen to the poor kid if he was caught reading his oldmans' ESQUIRES. Also, he doesn't understand Science Fiction. Take a tip from me, Jim. Never try to understand it and develop it, because you'll get frustrated. At least wait until you're twelve. I'm only ten, myself, you see. I have to wait two years, myself!

The pics— The one for CAPTIVES OF THE THIEVE STAR is really swell. Vestal doesn't crud his pictures up. Nice perspective. Excellent.

OUT OF THE DARK NEBULA's pic— oooooooooh! Where've I seen that before! Tsk tsk tsk tsk.

That fellow holding the gun on cartoonist Bill Garrigan looks like a typical mother-in-law. So does the mother-in-law climbing out the crater on page 63.

The pic on 80-81 is a jewel.

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There is no use, absolutely no use in trying to tell which stories in the issue of PLANET are good and which are bad. Maybe I'm stupid, maybe I'm easy to please. I liked all the stories. That is, none were too bad. Some were better than others.

I seen better, but—not bad, not bad.

DON J. LANOUZ

A. A. CRAIG REPLIES

Dear Ed,

Mr. A. J. Budrys' comment in the current PLANET as to "Witch of the Demon Seas" deserves an answer. He objects, you remember, to the use of a more or less Grecian nomenclature in a vaguely Minoan background, the implication being that it's a mere steal from

history. I'd like to defend myself and, by extension, every other writer who has ever done the same thing. It's common practice, you know. De Camp's Krishnan language—one of them, at least—is based on Persian Anderson's "Helping Hand" used Samoan and Old Norse as a basis for two languages, and "Tiger By the Tail" has a definitely Gothic ring. Asimov, especially in his Foundation yarns, draws names and situations directly from history and geography wherever they are needed, and one might multiply examples indefinitely.

My point is that it's a perfectly legitimate practice and does much to give certain stories a well-developed, convincing background. History does seem to follow general patterns—empires grow up and decay, civilizations evolve through cycles at least vaguely analogous to each other, situations of a given kind evoke corresponding responses in art, philosophy, technology, and overt action; and so it goes. It seems at least plausible to suggest that similar cycles will recur in the future, or on other planets, whenever conditions are similar. If Mr. Budrys doesn't like the notion, he'd better take it up with Spengler, Toynbee, and company, not with me.

As to languages, well, a language is not a collection of random elements, it has a character of its own and the looks and sounds of its words usually obey general laws of similarity. The typical Greek, German, or French word can hardly be mistaken for one in any of the other languages, to say nothing of such unrelated tongues as Finnish or Chinese. So your science-fiction writer trying to construct a plausible, self-consistent system of words and names does well to take some past or present language of Earth, mix up and distort its elements, and produce his own result. I admit, the ideal solution would be to make up your own language from scratch, roots and syntax and everything else—but my God, we only have twenty-four hours in a day!

I make no apologies for using the word "thal-assocracy," since that is what I meant and there is no equivalent word in English. I could have said "ubglub" or something on that order, but it would have necessitated tedious explanation of its meaning. I could not have called the ruler of Achaera a "sea king," because that phrase in English has come to be the standard translation of the Old Norse *sækonigr*, meaning a viking chief of royal blood and not the king of any land area. Will it make Mr. Budrys happier to pretend I called it an ubglub? All right, assume I did.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Mr. Budrys for bringing up an issue of some small importance to science-fiction. Thanks too for his saying he liked the yarn, and for calling me "erudite." 'Tain't so, but undeserved flattery is all the sweeter.

Sincerely,

A. A. CRAIG

NO GOOD EXCEPT...

91 East Navajo Road
Tucson, Ariz.

DEAR MR.———

I think that the May issue stunk because it wasn't any good except where it was and besides the stories weren't any good except for those that were good but the cover was horrible

and I wish that you would get another artist because Anderson isn't any good except when he is and that's never; he should stick to Jungle Stories at least I think he does the covers for Jungle Stories.

Naturally I love you madly because you were the one to print my 1st letter and you can get a loan off me the next time you see me anything up to 23¢.

Get some more stories from Chan Davis! Not that his name is a good name or anything, but I just think that he's a good writer. I also like his stories.

What did Budrys say about Dionne-etics being greater than My Old Flame & the Left-Handed Monkey-Wrench? It sounds fishy to me. There's nothing great about a left-handed skyhook.

Won't vote for Lanoue because he don't like Bray Buryrad he shouldn't of said that or I would have voted he to third place but since he did then I won't.

Sigler doesn't like the authors' science. I like the author's science. Q. E. D. Sigler is stupid.

One thing mizzing thiz izh. No ztorieiz by Izaac Azimov. He's one of my favorite writerz, so why not a ztory or zix?

Blurp blurp blurp blurp blurp blurp blurp blurp blurp blurp blurp! Vizi gone. Sneary good, maybe like Blish, no Sewell. Slavin, Van Rensburg, Mitchell so so now and then but good and bad otherwise. Why don't Al Leverertz write another letter because I like the way he wrote a letter to you (Bisquik) a long time ago and it was good and Beale is on his worple now.

I HAVE A COMPLAINT TO MAKE. TOP RIGHT COLUMN, PAGE 1111 SINCE WHEN DO THE GIRLS AND WOMEN AND THINGS IN THAT PIC WEAR CLOTHES? IT'S INDECENT! And besides, it don't look so purdy did the PO get after you or what you don't have that trouble in a fanzine except when you do.

You are hereby an honorary member of the S. F. T. P. O. J. B. A. E. O. P. S. A. A. A. T. C. A. B. A. A. N. G. A. N. I. B. E. W. T. A. B. A. A. N. G. A. B. H. B. F. E. N. A. T. Which, spelled out, means the SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF JEROME BIXBY AS EDITOR OF PLANET STORIES AND ANDERSON AS THE COVER ARTIST BECAUSE ANDERSON AIN'T NO GOOD AND NEITHER IS BIXBY EXCEPT WHEN THEY ARE, BUT ANDERSON AIN'T NO GOOD AND BIXBY HAS BRILLIANT FLASHES EVERY NOW AND THEN.

Whew!

I'll say one thing, PS has sure clumb up the old ladder since you took over at the helm but it can improve a lot and keep up the ole, as Bob Silverberg sez it, blood and gore, because you're the only mag with *good* blood and gore but I said that wrong, *he* said, *thud* and gore which I think is more descriptive but less interesting.

Pics to Sneary, Don Hutchison,—human, who for third? OK, a tie between Mrs. Mitz Schwartz and William F. Nolan. Liked very much this dissertashun on Yad Bradbury.

Er, buy the weigh, Rensburg, how did you find out that Linid Carter was a him? And are

you sure? Have you had it proven with photographs? With certified proof by a doctor? Have you seen him/her in person? Well, how do you know that him's a he? OK, OK, so he is! Are you *s-u-r-e*?

Glad you got a Cartier and whatinell's so uncommunal about a Timmins fan? I'm one meself and proud of it, tho I like Finlay better.

Ooooooogoogaaaurrrppogaaalkippoorrrrrrrrk! 2 man-e Bea-ns.

Goombye—

JOHN DAVIS (Member of the W.H.M.F.T.A.F.)

S.A.

4 Rochester Mansions,
Leyds Street,
Hillbrow,
Johannesburg, South Africa

THE EDITOR,

PLANET STORIES,
130 W. 42 St.,
New York 18, New York

DEAR ED,

This is my first letter to La Vizi and because of this I'm kind of nervous. I've been reading P.S. for years (if and when I could get them) and I think they are super.

I was quite lucky to get a recent issue of P.S. and that of January 1951 and give my opinion of the stories as follows:—

WITCH OF THE DEMON SEAS

O.K. for adventure Mag.

TIGER BY THE TAIL.....Liked this one.
MARTIAN NIGHTMARE.....Not too bad.
TASK TO LUNA.....No comment.
POISON PLANET.....Quite good.
GUEST EXPERT & SAFETY MARGIN
Not so hot.

The covers meet with my approval. It seems to me P.S. is going to lose a reader much to the readers regret, as I have a hard task trying to get hold of P.S. in this city. Perhaps you can help me in some way or maybe other readers of P.S. have back issues to sell. Could you also tell me how to get hold of some Science-Adventure books?

Hoping to hear from you and your readers.

Sincerely yours,

J. H. GROBLER

XANTU TO YOU

9500-21st Ave., N.W.
Seattle 7, Washington

DEAR EDITOR:

Sharpen up your pencils and sizors and prepare to cut up this masterpiece of misspelled words and improperly construed sentences.

First off, The Cover, if you can call that flimsy bit of paper a cover, was good. The art work was good but I can't figure out what story it was telling about. The gal was cute and I don't mean bow-legged either. Yep, I am old enough to like the women on the cover. At least I think that 22 is the age where a male starts to think about girls.

Second: The Vizigraph. Okay. But . . . This guy Edwin Sigler, who the bloody blue blazes is he mad at anyway? He sounded like a top sergeant. This guy thinks that people read S.F. because they like to think. Humm. I read S.F. to relax not to pick out all of the misused laws of science. It is just like the movies. Some of

the hair-brained people go just so they can pick out the mistakes. I have what you would call a brain job. When I pick up a copy of PLANET I want to relax, not to wear myself out tryin to find fault with the authors. As for the rest of the letters I think that they were tops. They should write for PLANET.

Third: The Stories, in the order of my preference.

1. Out of the Dark Nebule.

First place by a long way. Let's have more of this guy called Coe. A sister story called Xantu to You Too or I Lost my Little Space Ship Can I Use Your Life Jacket? would be nice.

2. Second place by a hair. I liked the ending so much I went back and looked at the start. The name, Blind Play, of course.

3. Third place goes to Garrigan's BEMS. I knew how it was going to end but I liked it very much.

4. Fourth place is shared by Dateline: Mars and Exile From Venus. There was no choosing between these two.

5. Fifth place is taken up by Open Invitation. There is no comment otherwise.

6. Sixth place is the poor section

A. The Byrd

B. Lake of Fire.

C. The lead story comes in last. Please don't put another one like Captives Of The Thief Star in the front of your book. That story took the Stinker Prize for the year.

I guess that I should vote for the letter that I think was best in the May ish, the vote goes to Donald J. Lanoue ESQ. And not because he is from Washington either.

I have no more gripes.

Goom Buy,

JACK R. HOPKINS

MORE COMPETITION . . .

Ste. 11-406 Notre Dame Ave.,
Wpg., Man., Canada.

MISTER EDITOR:

Well here I am again with another so called letter. There are a few beefs that I have. One is the simple fact that you always have one adventure type yarn in the ish which constituted the lead novel. Now why the Hades do you always do that? Also why the rather sexy parts in the darn things?? Outside of that okay.

Novel—Pretty good. Even though it is the adventure type. On seeing that blurb for your cover I'm wondering if I should wear asbestos gloves before I pick up the next ish. Slave Ship to And-rigo was a fairly boring piece to me. Venus Mission—Ah, that's milboy. Like but def. Sign of Life—That's a story?? Monster—Are you sure St. Clair didn't sneak in somewhere here? The Timeless Ones—Kind of good. Kind of?? Better than good. Just noticed I was looking at the wrong title. Temple of Han—Pretty good. Mercy Flight—Ah. Dear old Mack. Blackout in

Cygni—Why couldn't this have been the lead novel?? It may be that after two years of reading stf my ability to judge stories has atrophied but I can't find one story that rates very high in my esteem. So???

(One hour later)

That danged Myllotz always keeps bothering me. Keeps trying to destroy me and my laboratory. Never seems to get it through his thick synthetic skull that he can't get (Yikes). He hits me with his whollo ray where it hurts. Must fix those screens. He's trying to destroy the earth but with the helpful aid of my trusted friend Gragg as well as my own ingenious mind (who else but Otho?). We're able to keep him from doing this. His plans are getting trickier every day. Now he's mass producing robots which amazingly look like him to foil us and leave him alone. EvenGragg's helper Xrpilz can't detect him from a robot. Oh well.

When do we get a Bradbury epic??

I want to start a quarrel. Dennis Strong is a good guy. He's always right. He knows what he's doing. Everyone else is wrong. He knows everything about Bradbury. All stf fen don't know what we're talking about.

I leave you with this famous quote which I stole from a friend of mine: Gnothi seaton, gnothi kudos. Bill. Are you there?

Hey. What does S.O.P. mean? Does J. Blish know?

Hey. Ken. If you see this do you want to correspond??

Not the waste basket. Please!!

What are those golf balls doing on the cover? Oh, Moons?? You're kidding. How's the hero and heroine flying?? A "tawdy" bawd. Tsk. Tsk. Watch your language.

Yours stf anatically,

DOUGLAS MITCHELL.

P. S. I'm ashamed to say it but I'm the Vice President. Anybody able to mend broken arms??

JUST A PINCH OF POISON

Box 666,
Camrose, Alberta

DEAR EDITOR:

Howdy! Mind a beginner in this letter-writing business? I've been reading **PLANET STORIES** (plug) for nigh onto—let's see now, how long *have* I been reading them? Oh well. Let's say I've been reading them. Now for some belated opinions: I've just completed a trip back to March in my time machine and read that issue. Fraid my opinions will take up too much precious space, so I'll just give you one on **BLACK AMAZON OF MARS** by Leigh Brackett—Very good! Miss Brackett is an author (ess) to beat all authors. (Don't let Poul Anderson see this. I like him too.) That adventure style of her's is capti-
vating.

Now for the January issue:

1. **WITCH OF THE DEMON SEAS** by A. A. Craig—Velly delightful. One of the author's best. Liked the way the tale ended too.

2. **TIGER BY THE TAIL** by Poul Anderson
—That's my boy! Good tale. Man yeah! Congrats Poul.

3. **MARTIAN NIGHTMARE** by Bryce Walton—Fair, and a wee bit boring. (Pardonnez-moi Bryce.)

4. TASK TO LUNA by A. Coppel—Uh-uh! Too short for one thing. Get a wiggle on Coppel.

5. **POISON PLANET** by W. Oberfield—Peachy keen! Kinda grisly though. Offends my weak stomach, you know. Bet this boy will go places.

6. GUEST EXPERT by A. Lang—Nononononononono! (And no other comment.)

7. SAFETY MARGIN by J. M'Intosh—Give this one the old "heave-ho."

Well there you are. If the forementioned stuff makes the letter too long, chuck it out. Here are my favorite authors: Leigh Brackett, Poul Anderson, A. A. Craig, A. Coppel (sometimes), Ray Bradbury, and various others.

Oh yes—I liked that January cover. Who's the artist? Is he too shy to put his name on the drawing, or do I just need glasses? Hah? I probably need glasses.

By the way, I really like your mag, and think you do excellent work. Keep on with the good job. (And quit looking so smug.) I might even become a steady reader if you publish this letter. I'm the kind of goon who likes to see his (her) name in print. (Thrill, thrill.)

My typewriter is starting to collapse from all this typing, so I'll remove my decrepit body (my 18 years are beginning to tell), and leave you in peace or pieces.

"One more thing before I drag myself off to die— You do a very good job of hiding your address. I found it (I think) only after looking in a "Two Science Adventures" mag. You gave yourself away by talking about your "new address." Score one for M. Hartman. Hope the address is correct and I'm not writing to the wrong magazine. If you're gonna send poison through the mail, make mine strong with a little ice and a straw in it. I hear ground glass is in season too. Take your pick.

A Flying Saucer just landed in my front yard so I guess I'll have to go out and greet the aliens. Don't start heaving a sigh of relief, you'll hear from me again, never fear. See you on Pluto.

Astronomically yours,

(Miss) MAVIS HARTMAN.

P. S. If one Dennis Strong is reading this (if he can read), hope he enjoys all the "sly parenthetical inserts" that I'm in the habit of inserting.

He probably isn't enjoying the "nauseous comments" of this "driveling adolescent" but the feeling's mutual. I really feel sorry for poor, bitter Dennis. Guess he's an adolescent-hater. Am I right, Strong old boy?

VIRGIN, WHAT HO!

Lansdowne, Ontario.

EDITOR DARLIN':

I have just read the *Virgin of Valkarion*—which I enjoyed immensely, though perhaps not quite as thoroughly as the hero did. Good yarn in a nostalgic setting. But—what a **TITLED** Did Poul make it up all by himself, or did you help him? And what does it mean? You have an idea there, you could offer a prize for the best answer.

The obvious explanation is that the word *Virgin* was chosen for alliteration's artful sake. But, as usual, the obvious does not stand up well when more subtly scanned. For *Valkarion* is a word of the author's own coinage, and he could jolly well make it alliterate with any word in the dictionary, from *Aa* (a sort of lava), to *Zzz* (a

variety of snore.) Thus he could have named the yarn "The Swordsman of Swalkarion" in honor of the Hero, or "The Priest of Pralkarion" in honor of the Villain, or he might even have altered the name of the Imperial city to Whal-kerion.

E. M. JOHNSTON.

I fear we gave Poul a helping hoof with this one. Authors are so unimaginative.—Ed.

THE LISSOME MINK

1734 Newark St., So.,
St. Petersburg, Fla.

DEAR BIX:

For some reason or another, it seems to be a long time between letters. Not that dear ole PS doesn't deserve 'em, y'understand. The Link (as my friends, and a few of my enemies call your 'Umbler Correspondent) enjoys nothing better than sweating an afternoon away over his battered Corona, when he could be out slaking his Saharan thirst at the corner beer emporium. Then again, these Link letters take an enormous amount of concentration, to measure out the correct amount of ingratiation and subtle compliments so their seeing print is assured. Yea and verily, the art of Link letters is a difficult one (Get it? Art Linkletter? O Carter, you are a clever dog!) And if I may be permitted another pun, I have been missing so long from the Vizi, that you might call me The Missing Link (O Carter you did it again! O you are the gay fool!).

Okay, I'll stop!

Y'know Bixby, that wasn't a half bad cover on the March issue. Not half bad, it wasn't. Kinda nice (this is the ingratiation and subtle compliment I mentioned above. Heh heh.) in fact. And if you improve your covers as you've improved the inside pix, it would be sumpin'! CARTIER! Yes, you managed to get Cartier, and ORBAN! Bix, that is really something. Cartier is about my favorite artist, at least he's as good as Bok and Finlay. Now, uh, Jerry me old buddy, you couldn't manage to rope in Hannes and Virgil, too, could you, heh? Just a hint.

Well, on to the meat of the mag, yclept BLACK AMAZON OF MARS, or STARK RIDES AGAIN! This was a good, rousing bradswords-and-atom-blasters sort of science-fantasy, in the reliable PLANET style. This sort of yarn has been appearing in PS ever since VASSALS OF THE MASTER WORLD, BLACK FRIAR OF THE FLAME, and RED WITCH OF MERCURY, and will undoubtedly keep right on appearing in PS as long as that magazine continues to grace the newsstands. Not that I have anything against this sort of story, but after seeing it so often it becomes tiresome. The story is always the same; hero is bronzed Earthman, heroine is proud Martian princess (or proud Veneusian sorceress, or proud Saturnian warrior-queen, etc cetera), villain who is a ruthless and ambitious fellow Martian or Venusian or Saturnian, who resents the Earthman, having a crush on said proud MP (or PVS, or PSWQ etc.). Repetition does not endear this sort of thing, it just becomes silly.

Now, the only thing that saves BLACK AMA-

ZON from being dull, boring and silly, is that it was written by Leigh Brackett, a talented and imaginative authoress. She took this weary old plot, that would have been limp, uninspired and unreadable hack in the hands of an Erik Fennel or an Emmett McDowell, and turned it into poetry. "The great tower of stone rose up monstrous to the sky. It was whole and there were pallid lights within that stirred and flickered, and it was crowned with a shimmering darkness." She knows the secret of fusing poignant emotion, rich description, convincing action, and above all, a tremendous sense of atmosphere and lavish, excellent use of the English language, to her bare plot and turning it into something damn readable, BLACK AMAZON was a good story, colorful, poetic, and exciting. Let's have more from Brackett.

Next most surprising thing to your acquisition of Cartier, was the Van Vogt story. VV is one of the Aristocrats of sfiction. While his STAR SAINT wasn't much, still you've got Van Vogt and may be able to get something really worthwhile out of him. Poul Anderson, too, is a fine writer whose first few stories for you show absolutely none of the rare unconventional imagination that has made him so popular elsewhere. The rest of the stories in this issue were mostly rather good. HB Fyfe takes the cake with the poorest title in years.

Letters were good this time, too. Joe Gibson, who is rapidly becoming this fan's favorite letter-hack, had a good 'un as usual. This bloke has a lot on the ball—to coin a phrase—and knows how to expose it. My pal Shelby Vick had a good 'un too.

"Shelby Vick, he hits the spot.

Six-feet-two, and that's a lot!

He's so tall, when he comes to doors

He has to crawl through them on all fours!"

Now, this Strong gink, who is deriding the Sneary's, Bogg's, Stewart's, and Carter's, don't let's pay too much attention to him. If he doesn't like the Vizi, nobody's forcin him to read it at the end of a proton gun. He knows his letters will do no good, since the editor obviously likes letters of this sort or he wouldn't print them. My guess is that his letter is prompted by a desire for attention just as childish as the ones he accuses me, and others, of writing to satisfy. He simply wants to be the center of a raging controversy, see his name in print in several letters, and be in the limelight of a violent discussion for a while. Otherwise he wouldn't write, knowing his opinions have little chance of changing La Vizi's policy. Just ignore him, is my advice. He'll go away once he sees nobody is listening to his childish outburst.

And on this happy note, I take my leave. And before I forget it, letter prizes 1) Shelby Vick 2) Joe Gibson 3) Ken Beale.

Sincerely,

LIN CARTER, the Sage of St. Pete

The One, the Only, the Original Sage!

"Look for the Big Red Letters on The Forehead!"

BAH!

Lyon Falls, N. Y.

DEAR CENSORED:

Limited to three pages at the outside? Good. Now is the time for me to put in that order for three-foot long pages. Any objections? After all,

you didn't place a limit to the length, just the number.

The usual cover, altho the gal is dressed, for once. And it illustrates the story! This is an extremely rare occurrence, having happened only once or twice before on PLANET. The dawn of a new era is at hand! Not only do you get some of the top authors, including van Vogt, Fyfe, and Anderson, but you get Leigh Brackett back after an absence of too long a time. If I'm right, you haven't had one of her Mars stories since 1949. Too lazy to check, but that seems about right. And you are also getting some of the top artists. Keep it up boy, keep it up.

Stories all good. The van Vogt tale is a little off PS's usual run of tales, is it not? Perhaps it is a good omen. Maybe you'uns is gonna give us'uns the surprise of our lives by reforming into a pulp, format *Galaxy*.

Reprints! Bah! If you gotta have them, put them into a mag by themselves. But I don't think PS has published enough noteworthy tales to make a reprint zine in itself pay. Let this be the last of them, Censored, old chappie. Even though it is a good story.

On to La Viz: Hey, Censored, why not print the number of votes each of the top three letters gets? Just to make it more interesting. Pic winners, in my own not-so-humble opinion: 1) Gibson; 2) Beale; 3) Hapke. Wonder who'll pull down the Cartier pic? Something I'd love to own.

Best pic of the ish by Cartier on page 62. Next comes Orban first with the double-spread on 16-17 and then on page 31. Who did the pic of DUEL ON SYRTIS? Looks like Vestal to me. At any rate it stunk.

You're not alone in being a Timmins fan, Censored. You have a brethren in me. He may not be the best artist (that honor goes to Bok), but he is one of the top ten in my estimation. Veddly good on spaceships.

Speaking of Bok, when are we gonna get a cover by him? (You mad, wild dreamer, you!) I presume the one for this ish was done by Anderson, as usual. Please, Censored, lets have a little variety. You've been stuck with Anderson as long as SS and TWS have been stuck with Bergey and AS and FA have been stuck with Robert Gibson Jones! A change! If not in artist, at least in subject.

About hers I should stick in a poem but I ain't gonna. I want to have at least a slight chance of getting this thing published! So I'll just say . . .

Goombye, Censored—
BOB HOSKINS

A MATURE FAN SPEAKS . . .

7312 Blvd. East,
North Bergen, New Jersey,
Apt. 2-C.

DEAR JERRY:

I cast a rather doubtful eye on the March ish of P.S.—the other eye was doing a double-whammy meanwhile—and the doubtful orb grew even more apprehensive when it noted the extra shekel we 'uns now must fork over for an ish of P.S. I mumbled, as is my want, "This is the same P.S., same cover, or uncover, same untrimmed edges, etc."—On taking a peek in the

interior, however, all doubts ceased. Man! What are you-all trying to do—make P.S. the best SF mag on the market? Brackett, Van V., Gallun, Anderson, Fyfe, and Rocklynne—if this isn't a line-up I wouldn't know what a better one would be like. O.K., O.K., so I and a couple other readers I know that the Ray of Bradbury wasn't evident . . . and don't do dat again unless you wanna get 'audited' . . . the fair-haired-boy of STFantasy does make a rather fair issue of any mag when he's around, rest assured.

Albeit, since the P.S. budget now seems to allow room for the presentation of some of the better writers in the field, why not engage Lilith Lorraine for her inimitable fantasy verse, Willy Ley for his engaging articles, Will Jenkins, Doc Keller and Bob Heinlein for science-fantasy fiction, Seabury Quinn, master of the weird tale, and L. Sprague de Camp, exponent of humorous STFantasy! As for illos, this was by far the best illustrated issue in some eight years . . . but—eek!! Your covers—why is it that they all look alike? Orban was never better, and Cartier seems expressly cut out for this 'zine; however, sprinkle in some Finlay, Bok and Stevens, blend in Paul, and follow up with Orban as a chaser, and you can't go wrong with future issues.

The round-up of letters too was far from lamentable in the March Viz, and ample credit in particular goes to Dennis Strong's epistle. It takes much intestinal fortitude for a *mature* fan to give out with a wholesale lambasting against the *immature* fans, prevalent in that segment of fandom known as *FANDUMB*; and immaturity in fandom doesn't necessarily apply to those under twenty-one. All one has to do is take a look in the average SF mag's letter column, and therein is evident a jumble of indistinguishable epistles representing a constipation of thought and a diarrhea of words. Running through the gamut of all the stories in a previous issue of some 'zine and bringing out the highlights and lowlights of each yarn in boring detail does not represent intelligence; on the contrary, any fan thinking that what he has to say ament some author or story will affect the polley and/or circulation of a 'zine had better take up butterfly collecting as an occupation. Even if these idle ravings had some concrete bearing, I don't know of anyone, outside of some sub-moronic fans, who'd give a pile of dung for what a Sneary or Boggs thinks of Bradbury's, Hamilton's or Shaver's *literary style* . . . as if some of these confirmed illiterates ever knew what "literary" and *style* really mean. For instance, take Ken Beale's overlong and doubly insincere missive—and tho' I've no argument with the chap, you'd have to take a double-dose of Serutan to go through half of that "awe-inspiring" letter, and one or two others of similar ilk in the same ish—I wish that it were emphasized more strongly that a fellow doesn't necessarily disseminate a pro-zine word for word in order to see his name in print. (Okay, you've emphasized it . . . now what does it mean?—Ed.) A letter column should be more restricted to missives where people wish to air their views, beefs or ideas, and not to letters that bore the editor and likewise the readers into submission.

However, I disagree with Dennis' single statement that most of these addleheaded jelly-brains come from the . . . slightly lower middle-class

...—The majority of them belong to no class, knowing neither the meaning of country, home nor religion. Some are even veritable tramps—and I have heard that many are so slothful that their homes, if you can call 'em that, are veritable pig-styes and it would take a bull-dozer to clean some of their floors from the accumulated trash of years—is there an Air-Wick in the house?

In short, thank the Almighty that not all of STFantasy fandom is in such a shape . . . and to any outsider viewing these brickbats with goose pimples, let me reassure them that there are several hundred splendid people who are active-fans who are a credit to their communities and country, and who are responsible for keeping fandom together.

Ere I depart I shall cast a vote or two for the best epistles: Dennis Strong, *First* . . . Joe Gibson, *Second* . . . Mike Wigodsky, *Thoid*—and by the way, Mike, since when do you consider Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and *Paradise Regained*, as . . . high aesthetic nonsense . . . when most, if not all, U. S. and English-speaking colleges would disagree vehemently against you?

Planetically yours,

CALVIN THOS. BECK

THE WORD, ESCHUM, IS—

1455 Townsend Ave.
New York 52, 1950

DEAR JEROME:

Dennis Strong's letter in the March *PLANET* will probably result in mountains of letters—maybe even twenty of 'em—denouncing said Mr. Strong. But I, for one, feel there is much merit in what he says. Many of the letters in *La Vizi* are prime examples of juvenile egoboosting. Consider this excerpt, for instance:

"As a good friend of Isaac Asimov, I am a little distressed that you continue to spell Izimov's name incorrectly . . . it should be spelled Izak Isamoff and no other way." Etc.

Now this is obviously a specimen of the "de-testable childswarm" of which the obviously mature and intelligent writer speaks. The fellow who wrote that piece of puerile trash is quite apparently a "flabby pseudo-intellectual," as Mr. Strong terms it. By utilizing this bit of low humor he intends to show that *he* personally knows the great Isaac Asimov, and will condescend to let the whole world know it. I sincerely hope you will endeavor to keep this sort of drivel out of the august pages of the *Vizigraph*.

Seriously, I don't think the letter-column is a place for name-calling, which is an abuse of the privilege to sound off in print. Strong has a right to his opinions, but he should save epithets like "pimpily-faced adolescent" and "leech" for the fanzines, if they'll have them (which I doubt).

It seems to be in vogue to praise *DESTINATION MOON* and knock *ROCKET SHIP X-M*. While I certainly would not condone the scientific errors of the latter, I would like to point out that *it* had a constructive theme and tolerable acting, which the more polished production did not. *DESTINATION MOON* was a superb job of production, but it had no plot (which is excusable), and a war-mongering

theme (which is not). Maybe I'm a crazy sentimentalist, but I like to think that man's first jump into space will be for peaceful reasons, and not another step towards Atomiggeddon.

Anent Joe Gibson's remarks re porn—oh let's be blunt and call it sexy covers—When I first entered fandom, which was not untold ages ago, I held a fiery contempt for the *PLANET*-type cover. I wanted space ships, nebulae, etc., and lots of 'em. But now that a few years have passed by, my opinions seem to have done a semi-about-face. Certainly, I still prefer Bonestell to Anderson, and I do not lecherously eschew the cover girls on sfmags (that didn't quite come out right, did it?); but I can appreciate a good piece of cheesecake (now, now Bixby—let's not make sly comments) when I see it, and Anderson can be rather good at it.

Now for the stories, which some, I hear, consider the backbone of your magazine:

BLACK AMAZON OF MARS—Either you're a Brackett fan, or you ain't. I am, lucky me. This was quite a relief from the Coppell junk you'd be running. By the way, I got a laugh out of the Western movie, "Singing Guns." Vaughan Monroe plays an outlaw named Rhiannon!

THE STAR-SAINT—Interesting, though not very well-written.

ASTEROID OF FEAR—Worple-manure!
DUEL ON SYRTIS—Good! Good! I've always regarded hunting as a moral crime, myself. Murdering wild animals isn't too much beyond murdering people. The fellow who says he likes to get out in the Great Outdoors and feel the dangers of the hunt is rationalizing so hard it's comin out of his nostrils. Hunting is indicative that man is still an emotional infant, needing something like needless slaughter with the trappings of a two-sided battle to keep himself convinced of his superiority.

THE ENVOY, HER—Lousy!
THE DIVERSIFAL—Pretty good, but why a reprint? Surely you're not emulating a competitor which recently carried a feature called, as I recall, *The Corridor of Putrescence*. And let's not start sounding off about *PLANET*'s great and glorious past!

Give Beale's worple the Cartier; 2 to Kyne (what is this character, a traveling salesman?), and 3 to Wigodsky for taking the most space to say nothing.

Sincerely yours,

MORTON D. PALEY

P.S. Ghu's shmoos, Kyne's letter was in *SCIENCE-ADVENTURE* not *PLANET*. Well, if you've nothing to do with the third original, you can always give it to me.

And who perpetrated that "Strange Adventures on Other Worlds" cognomen? 'Bye . . .

TSK

760 Montgomery Street
Brooklyn 13, New York

DEAR JERRY:

Couple of minutes ago, I made a rather red-faced discovery . . . I wrote a letter on the January issue to you . . . and then forgot to mail it. It's still here, on my table. Want it?

The March issue came out today . . . I zoomed through it quickly—all except the Brackett yarn,

which I was absolutely unable to read—and I'll get this in the mails tonight so it'll make the next issue.

Leigh Brackett is a well-liked author, apparently, but in the last five years she's turned out just one story that I was able to like. That was "Sea Kings of Mars," in Slim Sam's mag. Otherwise, Mr. B., you put together a mighty pleasing assortment of yarns.

The best of the bunch was vV, with a yarn surprisingly smooth for him. (Hell, such repetition! If I say "yarn" once more in this letter, don't print it.) The Rocklynne story was as good as when I first read it—yet, I'm wholeheartedly OPPOSED to the reprint idea.

You won't find too many stories worth reprinting when you rummage around in those unholy war-time PLANETS; furthermore, there's quite enuf reprint material now without your starting in. No more?

Ah, the Vizigraph. Pies go to Gibson, Beale (Hi, Ken! some good old-fashioned log-rollin, eh what?) and—horrors—Wigodsky.

Dennis Strong's letter . . . whew! "Tight Clique of bully boys . . . sniffling, pimply-faced . . ." Ackerman, Mr. Strong, is but an honest tradesman trying to earn a living, selling merchandise. Of course, he is a leech, as Strong gently suggests, but why advertise it? Someone's gotta be a story agent!

The criticism of Sneary is wholly unwarranted. Rick's got his troubles, but I believe he's genuinely interested in fandom and so on. And I can't think of a more serious-minded fan than Boggs. Banister, are ya listening?

On the other hand, I'd rather read such a letter, by Strong, than one of the type Edwin Sigler is noted for . . . this is because I'm so biased, so prejudiced, and so narrow-minded as to think people like Sigler should be shot.

By a firing squad, preferably.

The present state of the Vizigraph is most distressing. Instead of real old-fashioned feuds and jokes (Pythn feathers . . . Bond's Martians . . . Conway . . . Asimov's pic-winning), we get ignorant people trying to spread race superiority, and deluded people calling some of the nicest guys in fandom big words. Tsk.

Hell, Jerry, I missed the Cartier the first time through. Second time around it looked like Kramer, only vastly improved. Third time around I noticed the signature.

We'd like Rogers and Finlay, too.

Never satisfied, are we?

The backstrip was very nice . . . the best color arrangement you've ever used. Keep it that way—only get rid of the idiotic and childish quotes around "Strange Adventures on Other Worlds." Who are you quoting, anyhow?

Tsk again. Reminds me of the time Palmer split an infinitive.

Ah, yes, let's put two staples in each copy, or else use no staples and replace the staples with chewing-gum. (Shades of the SFTPPWSSTFM). It makes for darned lopsided reading with no upper staple.

Hmmm—what an unusual switch on the cover. The HERO is wearing the sun-suit, and the girl is clad up to her neck. No . . . Bug-Eyed Monsters, also. For shame, Bix, for shame!

Sincerely,

BOB SILVERBERG

WE HAVE A BROKEN SPIRIT

4070 Georgia
San Diego, California

DEAR MR. BIXBY,

Well, here it is time for another issue of PLANET and I am all enthused—(here I rush down stage, grab up issue of PLANET and hastily read—well, well, well! I was sure right. Yep (spits in spittle) it is a grand issue. Let me compliment you on a great issue (he laughs under his breath to himself)—why can't every issue be as great as this one! Why I love Himphbeer, him being my favorite author of bloody space-romances. And Torusheer is great at making the back of my neck stand up with his stories of the Martian Burhstetbrisytyuerasfer. Why, how did you know I wanted to read more of his stories? Snack—I just love editors that can read the readers mind.

Sady Jiuotprashy. Editor of the Lovely Martian, the best Fan-zine for "Ladies" only.

Yes, this is one of the types of letters you receive after every issue. And then there is the letter that goes like this:

DEAR MR. BIXBY,

Why, you old coot, why don't you just drop deader than a Shaver fan? You ought to go fly a beat-up spaceship around Regel IV for a million years if you think I will ever buy one of your Ole Beat-up Mags. I think that the last issue was pure tripe. I am sure that my eminent friend Mr. Morton Percival Fyveandhammer will heartily agree with me. I ought to know. I am editor of the Intergalactic Scandal Sheet and have held this post for nearly three months. I am proud of our record of digging up all the scandal in fandom and pro-mags and bringing it to the attention of the fans. Now you'd just better straighten up and fly right if you want a good review. Or do you want that affair with the Fertasyuniher story brought out? Please cancel my subscription and send it to the Burtseyfher Publishing House. They at least publish a decent mag. Interplanetary Love has always been my favorite (here the writer makes a few remarks that any editor would have the sense to cut out.) Now I don't give a Martian Dam if I never read another issue of PLANET!

Roland P. B. V. X. Reafysreiuq,

President of the S.T.U.F.S.F. and F. S. of D.E.T.U. Dues are just \$15.00 a month. Send them to me in care of the address above.

It is no wonder that the poor editors suffer from broken spirit. You can please some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all the people all of the time. I will not try to copy any of my two examples. Guess you know how I feel. If a person takes time and energy out to write to a pro-mag, why in Billy Blue Blazes hasn't he the brains to write a fair letter! There is very little sense in all this "I like—did not like" business

. . . an editor has had far more experience in the field than all the many co-editors that he has. Now, I am not saying that I want all letters disbanded. (As long as they don't disseminate, that is—Ed.) would I be writing you this if that was the case? By no means. All I am saying is: "Fans, when you write an editor, don't

try to play God and tell him what to do. Remember, we are all human. We all make mistakes. Write him and tell him. But do not raise the heavens doing it. If you do not like Bradbury, or Brackett, or some other, tell him. There is always a good and a bad way of doing things."

I say to you, Mr. Bixby, with all sincerity, thanks for the change. You have given us better illos and a neater looking magazine, but (here I go) how about the cover? How about giving Anderson a rest, which by the way he needs very badly, and letting some other duck take it a few times? And I shall not comment about the girls, for being a strong liker of females, I enjoy them. But I do not think that the cover of such a high and rising magazine of PLANET's quality should be draped with one ever issue. I know Esquire is a fast seller, but so is National Geographic. So give us some swell Star Maps on the cover, heh?

Fantastically,

ROGER NELSON—The Screwball

TRIPLE-TRACK MIND

164 Geneva Place
Covina, Calif.

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

Just finished the March PLANET. Well sir, you really have a magazine this time. ALL of the stories are good—not a stinker in the lot. May I go ahead and give my inconsequential opinion? Thanks.

Being dumb about mathematical ratings and the point system, I shall stick to my own method of grading, which is presently illegal in these United States.

DUEL ON SYRTIS. This one in my estimation is far and above all the rest in the issue. How that young Poul Anderson can write! He not only tells a good story, but he creates an atmosphere as well. His Mars is not only probable—it is also possibly correct astronomically. The mood he creates—pity, terror and compassion for a dying race—is well expressed and well sustained. I rate this one—three cherries.

THE STAR SAINT. Is this the old Van Vogt or the post-dianetic Van Vogt? Probably the latter, as the Hubbard influence shows in the main character—a sort of pale reflection of Ole Doc Methuselah, the super-fixer. This does not come to life as his former things have done. Rating—two lemons and one plum.

THE ENVOY, HER. Be he the Fyfe or be he the Piper, this gentleman writes good stories. I like the idea in this one. Ideals and dreams are always more satisfactory than the realization. The woman who can be a perfect mate, companion, friend, was never born, except in a man's wistful brain. Rating—one cherry and two plums.

ASTEROID OF FEAR. This is a swell story, in spite of the fact that it would be equally plausible, equally dramatic, if the setting were any pioneer country on earth, with today's date-line. In this case the plot and the psychology are the thing, not the science-fiction. It is good enough to rate—two cherries, one plum.

THE DIVERSIFAL. My personal reaction to this story is the usual one of confusion which always overtakes me when I run up against a time-tarvel paradox. I can't take 'em—just don't have that sort of a brain, Bud! I like Rocklynn's

bird stories better. If I could judge this one objectively I would probably rate it higher; as it is, I give it two plums and one lemon.

BLACK AMAZON OF MARS. I came near not reading this one at all. The title blurb put me off—it sounded as if the story would be a bang-bang space opera strictly for kids, and the cover, with that over-developed wench in the black longies—(to save washing, yet?)—did nothing to correct this impression. But I soon found out it was a John Stark story. Now I like Stark. He and C. L. Moore's "Northwest Smith" are two of the three Musketeers of space, and fitting comrades for an evening's entertainment. I can't think of a third one, unless it is the afore-mentioned Ole Doc. All three are men after my own heart—they love 'em and leave 'em! This epic gets three plums. TILT!

I see two of your competitors are using planets instead of babes on their covers. All to the good. I have heard the argument that the sexy covers draw purchasers who think they are getting something in a little snappy pornography. However, if that is what they want, they never buy another issue, while many a reader who would be delighted with the high class science-fiction in your pages may likely be put off by those horrible covers. If I did not have the habit of lying on my stomach on the drug-store floor among the kids reading the comics whilst I look over the contents page, I would doubtless pass up a lot of good reading myself.

As for the Vizigraph: Beale, Vick, Wigodsky, in that order. Who is this Dennis Strong who is so severe on the adolescents? I did not care for the tone of his letter. Bet he was or still is an insufferable brat himself. How can he tell what genius lurks in the brains of these kids he condemns so unkindly? I have the honor of being a friend of Ray Bradbury's, and I have heard it bruited about Los Angeles fandom that Ray himself was a horrible problem child when in his early teens. And look at him now, on top of the heap! And Ray does not put on that superior tone Mr. Strong affects—he is one of the kindest, most friendly fellows that ever stepped. So there!

If this letter strikes you as slightly incoherent, it may be because I am baby-sitting with three of my 13 grandchildren, listening to "The Fat Man" on the table radio, and cutting an eye at the television across the room all the while I am writing this. Who says I have a single-track mind? So overlook the parts that don't make sense, and just accept the congratulations on a good job of putting out this issue. (As co-editor of the latest "Shangri-la," the LASFS fanzine, I have come to feel sympathy for your profession!)

Most sincerely,

(Mrs.) RORY M. FAULKNER

BIG EXPOSE!

Carthage, Mo.

DEAR EDITOR:

I have landed quite a few letters in other magazines, mainly because I preferred the various policies of these other publications. I admit, I have considered your PLANET Stories a bit juvenile as compared with a few others. But I want to comment a bit on PLANET. After all, I have been reading Science-Fiction (capitalized in

honor of the few really good stories I have come across) since 1935.

In 1939 I met a fellow in school whom, I realized shortly, was to become a good writer in this line someday. He has, I refer to Kris Neville. I mention this because it is indirectly thru' Kris that I bought this March copy of *PLANET*. Although Kris has been in Santa Monica for over three years, we have corresponded. He has told me of how dianetics has swept some of the writers out on the Coast. A. E. van Vogt has not proved immune and he is the "Moses," I gather, of dianetics out there. So I thought that I might try out van Vogt's *THE STAR SAINT* to see if it was anything like his usual work.

I now place *THE STAR SAINT* at the lower end of the board! van Vogt was unable to give any character to any of his characters. There was no real plot to the story, none of the usual explanation of how anything unusual worked. I have read less interesting stories in the past six weeks, but *THIS* is not the old van Vogt! I place Anderson's *DUEL ON SYRTIS* as much better. Is "Syrtis" the Martian name for Mars? *ASTEROID OF FEAR*, by Raymond Z. Gallun had more real characters than anything I have read this issue. Really good. And Vestal is a fine artist too. His work on these two just mentioned, and his drawing for *BLACK AMAZON OF MARS* by Leigh Brackett, went a long way toward my placing them as the top three. Brackett wrote a fine adventure but seemed to have borrowed a lot from *hither and yon*.

Dennis Strong is a fellow who writes a sensible letter. I want to see more letters of this type. Maybe we can organize a private war between the teen-agers, with their yatter-yatter and us old timers over the relative merits of our very different ways of expressing ourselves. Strong and I will be a focal point for old timers to gather round. Proponents of either side would do well to train with weights, the barbell way, as advertised by one company. Seriously, if a number of readers would use the system advertised on page three, or any system of scientific weight training they would be better off. Why must so many of you remain a "sniffing pimply-faced adolescent?"

Sincerely,

BOB BARNETT,

1107 Lyon,
Carthage, Mo. (pronounced "Misery")

TOO STRONG . . . IMPOSSIBLE

50 Plaza Street,
Brooklyn 17, N. Y.

DEAR PENCIL-PUSHER:

It was a cold night, and the wind beat against my frail body in gales. But I stumbled on, rushing down the street towards my distant destination. Up ahead shapes loomed up suddenly, and I knew that I was doomed. But I would die like a BEM, fighting to the last. The shapes grew closer and a dank odor of long-decaying flesh assailed my nostrils. Then I met the shapes head on and felt shaggy arms tearing at my body. I pulled a dagger from my pocket and stabbed at the thing closest to me. I felt the dagger dig deep into a mass of slimy flesh. As I withdrew my weapon, the monster spewed forth a stream of Bergey covers and died.

I stabbed again wildly. Three of the creatures fell, the one remaining thing running for a doctor to heal a minor wound in his shoulder which was merely giving forth one-page illustrations. Encouraged by this victory I ran on, the cold steel of the dagger glinting brightly in my hand. The wind hit me in a sudden gust and my body was thrown head-over-heels. I lay groveling in the dust. However I managed to pick myself up and soon I arrived at the goal I had fought so hardly for. I had come to a large manhole which I quickly opened and slipped into the sewer below. I waded knee-deep thru the rushing water till I came to a place where the water formed a pool. I dove deep into this pool, and under the formation and found myself in a large, dimly-lighted cavern. In the middle of this vast room stood a rock pedestal on which stood three black-robed fans, the elite of fandom. They were flogging Dennis Strong who was spiked to a wooden pole.

Under the pedestal and around it were scores of science-fiction magazines such as *Sexy Science Stories*, *Gory Gruesome Garish Horror Stories*, etc., and around the pedestal itself were hundreds of fans chanting and occasionally dripping green. I joined this group. When the flogging of Dennis Strong was over, and we had tossed him into the den of the baby fans where he would soon be devoured, we all took our turn in walking to the pedestal where Bixby The Blue-Eyed BEM, was handing out magazines. I got an issue of *PLANET* and feeling slightly cheated because of this went home immediately after a thoroughly enjoyable night.

All kidding aside, Ed, the July ish of *PLANET* was really a fine one. The cover was wonderful but most of your covers have run in the same line, man with pretty girl slashing away at enemies with sword, etc. However if not unusual, very well done. The stories were all very good especially "The Timeless Ones" by Frank Belknap Long which gave forth a new idea, and something which science-fiction really needs are new ideas. "The Virgin of Valkarion" by Anderson was also very good and your other story "Slave Ship To Andriago" by Ross Rocklyne was equally superb. "Monster" by Morrison was one of the best shorts in the mag. "Temple Of Han" was also very good. All the other stories were good making up an issue the likes of which you have not had since that wonderful September issue.

I see that the Dennis Strong controversy is raging hard even though, as the above paragraph states, there is no longer anything left of Dennis Strong. However, every person has a right to his own opinion, and I'm afraid that the fen answering him have been almost as insulting as Strong was in parts of his now famous tome. They could have made a better showing of themselves. I myself think that Mr. Strong is all mixed up. Take a look at it this way. Dennis—(my middle name is Dennis too, so I can't be too hard on the fellow)—many fen write letters, and many fen read them. So don't you think it would be a little bit boring if all those letters were all serious? I get a big kick out of reading some of these letters and so do many others. Many fans say that Dennis is a snob and should start reading something else. However it is my opinion that he really likes science-fiction and is just blowing off some steam at a situation which

has gotten a little out of hand. But in this tough world people should be a little funny, not dead serious. God knows there's enough seriousness in the world today. As for Mr. Strong's statement about him being the only person in fandom who could understand Ray Bradbury that's plain silly. I have a complete collection of Bradbury's works and I think I understand him very well. As for Asimov I too get a little sick of seeing him sending in letter after letter about the misspelling of his name. My name is McNamara and you can just imagine how some people spell it but I don't waste valuable magazine space even if I were one of the greatest s-f writers in the world. I think that Strong just got a little upset at a thing that has been a cause of frustration for many people and sat down and wrote a letter which was a little too Strong for even Strong! Don't let's take this too serious, fella's!

Very truly yours,

ROBERT DENNIS MCNAMARA

NO MORE DOGIES LIKE MONSTER

52 Columbia St.
Newark, Ohio

DEAR EDITOR,

Your July issue contains a truly horrifying story "Monster." After cleaning up behind fox terriers, beagles and one police dog it seems to me the human mind would quail before the task of playing stable orderly to a critter the size of a dehorned moose. Oh woe, oh sorrow! Still, in the future most people outline, all the upholstery would be plastic. All the housewife would have to do is hook up a couple of 2½" hose line to a deluge nozzle and then proceed to do takeoffs of Hercules in the Augean stables.

Anderson's name for the beast of burden in his yarn sounds a bit funny. Why didn't he use the other invader of Britain? Or would "Horsa" sound more familiar and less otherworldly than "Hengist"?

To return to the story first mentioned, if the idea of taking the familiar and giving you the heebie jeebies with it is a main line with this Morrison here's hoping there is more from him in the future.

Yours truly,

JOHN P. CONLON

FREE SPEECH EVEN FOR STRONG

84 West 176 Street
Bronx 53, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR,

I have just finished the July issue of PLANET. As usual I liked most the stories about the same with perhaps a slight leaning towards Poul Anderson's opus. "The Timeless Ones" was a very good short indeed. I was quite surprised to see my name up there for a mention. For a pleasant surprise for you this time, read further. This month's cover was the closest you have ever gotten to my ideal and I was happy to see it.

Could it be that my words have not all been in vain?

I don't remember Strong's letter at all and I refuse to go looking for it. However I think I can say my piece without referring to it thanks to the letters he drew in return.

I feel that anybody interested enough to write a letter must be allowed their say no matter how they say it. I draw the line at some of Sigler's diatribes but this is still, I hope, a free country and he has the right to blow off steam if he wishes. There is one qualification to all this, however, and that is my right to ignore that sort of stuff. Campbell's letter was a masterpiece of analysis. I give him a medal. His letter, appearing just ahead of Mr. Zelitch's is a wonderful refutation of the latter's premises.

I'm looking forward to the next issue and its cover.

Regards,

LARRY ROTHSTEIN

THE HOLLYWOOD SLANT—

4009 Melrose Ave.
Los Angeles, Cal.

DEAR OLD EDITOR,

OK . . . that does it! Dennis Strong has got me Irish up and I'm about to lower the boom.

I want to go down in the books on the side of Sneary, Boggs, etc., the "adolescents." Sure some the time they are a little over the line of good taste and good humor but occasionally they come up with a gem of a remark that makes up for the rest of the creerzap they put on paper.

And as for Mr. Strong's contention that they, along with others, do not 'understand' the likes of Bradbury—I say who cares? Least of all Mr. Bradbury I should imagine. Mr. Strong strikes me as the type who goes around feeling superior when they discover that "wherefore-art-thou-Romeo" means "why" and not "where."

Sneary, etc., are what in theatrical terminology we call "fringe" which means they like the field (sf or theatre)—know quite a lot about it—follow it regularly and most important *pay cold hard cash for the privilege!* If it wasn't for the likes of them there wouldn't be the likes of us!

Maybe they are self-styled-critics. I have yet to meet the critic who wasn't. Including myself, Mr. Strong, and all editors and producers.

Well, I feel better now.

Sorry this letter doesn't quite reach the 800-word minimum. Also sorry to be so latish in piling into the fight—if there is or was one. But working days in an advertising firm, working nights in rehearsals and performances and trying to sandwich in a few more college credits towards my degree (only 8 more units to go! Hot Zig-gity!) doesn't leave much time for sf reading. The mags pile up on my desk until such times when I can tack a "gone-to-Mars-for-weekend" on the door and I can wander around with a mag in one hand and a dust cloth in the other, catching up on both luxuries of life.

"fan"atically yours,

JEANNE MORGAN

THOUSANDS NOW PLAY

who never thought they could!



After Ten Months Plays in Band

I had no idea I would accomplish so much musically. After only ten months I was playing in bands. I now am employed in a music store as an instructor. This I owe to your marvelously simple lessons.

*R. C., Paterson, New Jersey



Wouldn't Take \$1000 for Course

The lessons are so simple that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course.

*S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.



Shares Course With Sister

The teaching is so interesting and the pieces so beautiful I couldn't ask for anything better. I recommend your course highly. My sister shares it with me and feels the same way.

*D. E. G., Wausau, Wis.



Lots of Fun

The progress I have made is thrilling. I'm on Lesson Seven and tossing off "Little Buttercup" like a maestro. The course is easy and what is most important—lots of fun.

*B. B., Jr., Hartford, Connecticut



Plays After 2 Months

I hesitated before sending for your course because of an earlier experience I had with a course by ear from another company. I am playing pieces now I never dreamed I would play after only two months.

*E. T., Prichard, Ala.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

You, too, can play any instrument

By this EASY A-B-C Method

YOU think it's difficult to learn music? That's what thousands of others have thought! Just like you, they long to play some instrument—the piano, violin, guitar, saxophone or other favorites. But they denied themselves the pleasure—because they thought it took months and years of tedious study to learn.

Learn in Spare Time at Home

And then they made an amazing discovery! They learned about a wonderful way to learn music at home—without a private teacher—without tedious study—and in a surprisingly short time. They wrote to the U. S. School of Music for the facts about this remarkable short-cut method. And the facts opened their eyes! They were amazed to find how easy it was to learn.

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U. S. School of Music, Dept. 2766, Port Washington, L. I., N.Y. (53rd year)

FREE!

Print and Picture Sample



NOTICE

Please don't confuse our method with any systems claiming to teach "without music" or "by ear." We teach you easily and quickly to play real music, any music by standard notes—not by any trick or number system.

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC—Dept. 2766
Port Washington, L. I., New York

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Piano	Saxophone	Clarinet	Practical
Guitar	Trumpet, Cornet	Trombone	Finger
Hawaiian	Reed Organ	Flute	Control
Guitar	Tenor Banjo	Modern	Piccolo
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Piano Accordion		Harmony	

Mr. _____ Have you _____
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NOTE: If you are under 18 years of age, parent must sign coupon.

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